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Article

LibGuides in Political Science: Improving Student Access, Research and Information Literacy

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Abstract

This paper discusses the use of LibGuides as an example of Information Literacy (IL) provision specifically enhancing student research in Political Science and International Affairs. LibGuides provide a gateway for library research which reduces student apprehension and enables the faculty of Political Science and International Affairs to guide inquiry to a variety of sources and a multitude of perspectives. Flexible and personal, LibGuides enhance the effectiveness of teaching by expanding faculty guidance while encouraging the students to address the challenges of information literacy such as the efficient acquisition, choice, and ethical use of relevant sources. Experience and adaptation of LibGuides at North Georgia College & State University are discussed in this paper as one way by which Information Literacy is promoted, resulting in improved student research. The authors are Professors of Political Science at North Georgia, which is a public and medium-sized Liberal Arts University in the American South.

Keywords

LibGuides, information literacy, gateway, student research, political science

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1.   Introduction

Information literacy, defined by the Association of College and Research Libraries (2000) as, "...the ability to know when information is needed and to access, evaluate, and use information effectively and ethically" comprises important skills that must be developed in the college classroom to help students become information-literate learners in order to succeed not only in an academic environment, but also in the workforce after graduation. With the wide variety of resources available today in libraries and online through search engines and e-books, web-based news sources and databases, students are easily overwhelmed. As a result, at North Georgia we see the integration of Information Literacy into the curriculum as vital to address the information overload through the development of the critical thinking and analytical skills of students. The LibGuide approach is used to enhance student information literacy. LibGuides are a content management and knowledge sharing system for

libraries that offers access to particular areas of study thereby enabling focused support to increase the information literacy skills of students and the quality of their research. At North Georgia, the use of LibGuides is integral to the development of information literacy skills among the entire student body, including political science majors, the student population examined in this paper.

The management of LibGuides is through a hosted server platform to which universities subscribe and which is maintained, supported, and safeguarded by the Springshare Corporation (Springshare, 2009). The aim of LibGuides is "to enhance research and access to the information students and patrons seek" (Springshare, 2009). A LibGuide essentially places the researcher in a web-based page to begin research. This starting point is in effect a doorway with immediate access to a list of sources selected by the creators of the LibGuide to help students develop research skills. A LibGuide can consist of internet links to items such as news, governmental and academic sites, blogs, libraries, citation styles, search engines and databases; whatever its creator feels would help the researcher get started.

This is especially helpful for the typical university student unfamiliar with a given topic, such as the military junta in Myanmar (Burma), as the LibGuide provides access to library search engines and specific news sites such as the BBC where relevant information can be located. In essence, LibGuides attempt to remove the all too common mental research block by replacing the initial confusion associated with a multitude of resources with a pre-selected list of sources.

The LibGuide is a tool with which the informed and unbiased educator and librarian collaborate, transferring their knowledge directly to the student researcher in a more digestible form. LibGuides are based on a template with an established format allowing for an easy set up, at the same time these resources can be personalised to whatever degree the creator desires. This enables LibGuides to be developed by both experienced and inexperienced users. Due to their collaborative nature, LibGuides have helped bolster information literacy efforts on campus because they help library and faculty staff to capitalise on each other's knowledge and experience.

The most positive feature about LibGuides is their flexibility of dealing with and conveying content. They can be broad in terms of covering an entire subject, Latin American politics for example, or focusing on a single author such as Jane Austen. The following screen shots illustrate two of the many ways LibGuides can be organised.

Figure 1: Global Issues course front page screenshot
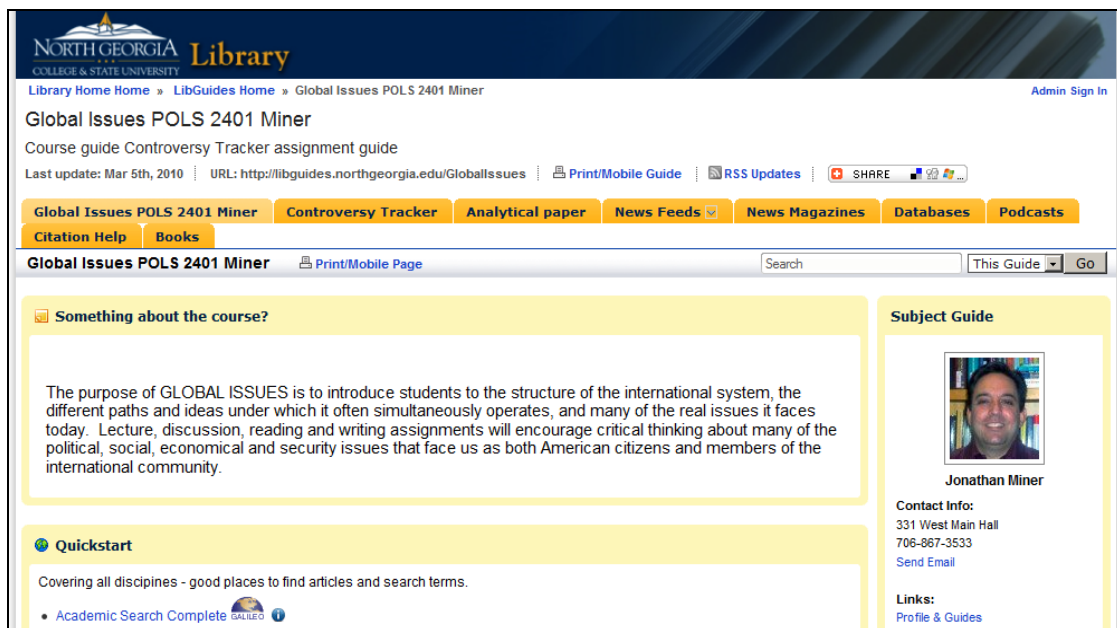
Figure 2: American Political Theory course front page screenshot
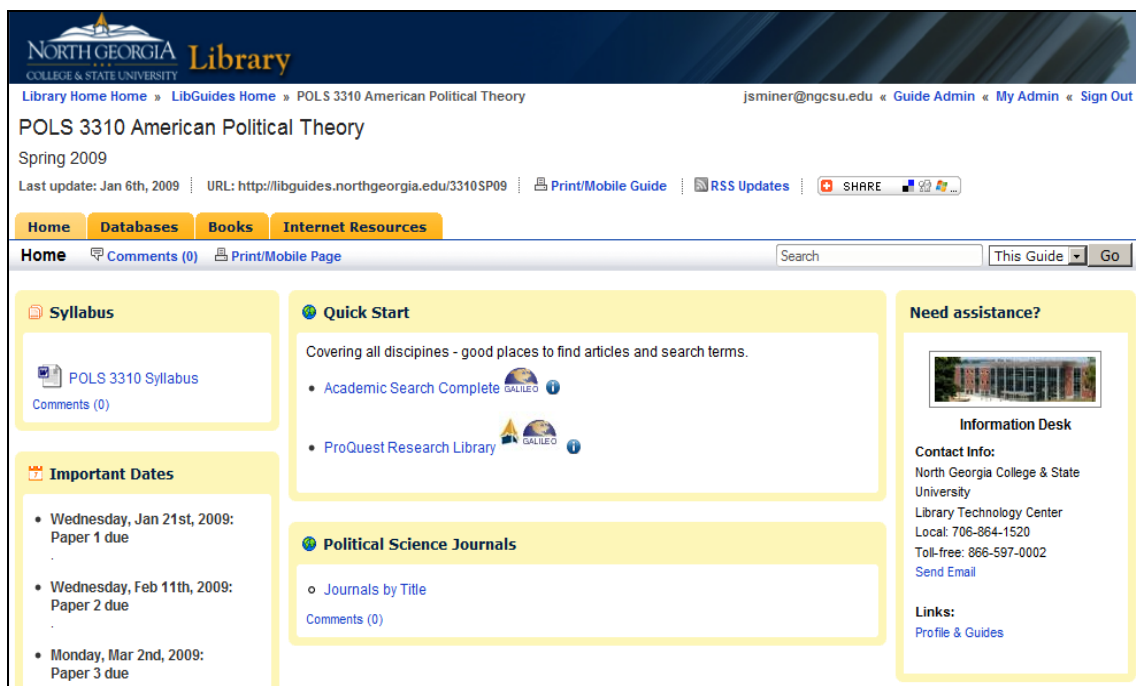
All LibGuides consist of a number of text boxes, tabs, and links, although the choice and organisation of these features is customised to suit the need of the instructor and of the discipline covered as illustrated by the different display in content and assignments provided by the two front pages shown above.

This article investigates the use of LibGuides within two sub-disciplines of Political Science, their use in lower- and upper-division undergraduate courses, as well as their usefulness when employed in the investigation of broad and narrow subjects. Our goal is to show the utility of LibGuides, the way they foster collaboration and

enhance the students' information literacy competences. The recent introduction of LibGuides at North Georgia has resulted in increased student access to available scholarship, which in turn has informed their decision-making. The impact of LibGuides in university learning outcomes has yet to be conclusively proven, and this paper does not seek to do so here. The aim is to convey the authors' professional and first-hand experience on the use of LibGuides in their attempt to make research easier for students as they progress through their undergraduate work.

2.   Literature Review

According to Snavely and Cooper (1997), information literacy is widely acknowledged in American Higher Education (HE) institutions as an important skill for students to acquire and develop, although they also argue that, despite the fact that information literacy has been discussed by the literature for nearly 30 years, some scholars find this concept difficult to define and therefore difficult to assess. More recent sources such as Rockman (2002), Johnston and Webber (2003), Verlander and Scutt (2009) propose that information literacy is becoming more integrated in the HE systems of English-speaking nations, such as the United States and the United Kingdom. However, problems do remain, especially with regard to the teaching and assessment of IL-related concepts (Thornton, 2008). A solution, the authors of this paper contend, is to formalise and diversify IL-related programmes and activities across campus by involving all the stakeholders and interested parties including: librarians; classroom faculty; administrators; and students. Most importantly, as argued by Jacobsen and Germain (2004), there is a need to set up a formal and permanent information literacy committee that oversees and monitors these programmes and activities, something that has been done at North Georgia.

On a campus which has integrated and embraced information literacy, as suggested by Owusu-Ansah (2004), the academic library can serve as the nexus or repository for information literacy management, facilitating information literacy programmes and providing information literacy tools for the entire university because information literacy affects every academic discipline and combinations of degrees (i.e. major/minor) regardless how seemingly disparate and different the nature of these subjects are (Owusu-Ansah, 2004). For example, effective research and writing skills are important for students in Biology and History, Education and Chemistry even though students in these majors might be required to produce written assignments that are dissimilar or follow different research practices, such as lab reports, lesson plans or a historical précis. As Lupton (2008) contends, the earlier students are introduced to information literacy the better, while Mackey and Jacobson (2004) argue that IL concepts and competences can be expanded and reinforced in upper-division courses.

3.   LibGuides at North Georgia College & State University

The use of LibGuides at North Georgia College & State University began in 2007 as a response to the complex system-wide library system of public universities in Georgia. The multitude of available libraries, search engines, journals and multimedia resources made research and the acquisition of information often seem incredibly difficult processes to master for many undergraduates. LibGuides put library resources into more easily accessible and understandable contexts and are effectively utilised across the curriculum in such widely-varied subject areas as Introductory English Composition, Biology, Art, and Business Communications. They are also used in specific and advanced topics such as Management, Accounting, European Politics, Research Methods in Psychology, the Mongol Conquests, and the

U.S. State of Georgia. The use of LibGuides has dramatically expanded since its introduction in 2007 when just 19 of these guides were created. By 2008, 108 LibGuides were in use, and by 2009, the number of guides increased to 159. As of May 2010, there are 247 LibGuides in use in the university community (North Georgia College & State University Library). The following screen shot shows several of the different ways a user can access LibGuides: browsing by subject, by tag, or level of popularity.

Figure 3: Accessing LibGuides screenshot

For the calendar year 2009, comprising two full semesters and a full summer course schedule, the top ten LibGuides at NGCSU were accessed almost 56,000 times, with the Library Databases LibGuide leading the way with almost 44,000 hits. The most popular specific course and subject LibGuides show their versatility and wide appeal among students: the Mongol Conquests (History), Global Issues (Political Science), Fundamentals of Management (Business), and Human Histology (Biology) (North Georgia College & State University Library, 2009). The value of LibGuides is in their effort to make a specialised and potentially-intimidating topic, such as the Mongol Conquests, as accessible to research as a broad topic such as Global Issues. With an enrollment of approximately 5,800 students, both undergraduate and graduate, the popularity of LibGuides at North Georgia is significant and continues to grow.

3.1   LibGuides in Introduction to Political Science and American Political Theory

At North Georgia, Introduction to Political Science is a required lower-division (i.e. first year level) course for all Political Science and International Affairs majors. It is not to be confused with American Government, which is an introductory, general education course, focusing entirely on the American political system, and one that students with all majors would potentially take. By contrast, the Introduction to Political Science course offers a broad overview of the entire discipline, focusing on many of the sub-disciplines within the field, including comparative politics, international relations, public administration, political theory, political economy, to name a few. The intent is to 'orient' students to the Political Science and International

Affairs majors, offering them a pre-cursor to what they can expect in their upper-division courses (i.e. courses in which students enroll during the third and fourth year of the degree). As such, this introductory course is taught more like an upper-division course covering theoretical content and requiring students to write a formal research paper. Introduction to Political Science offers the students an opportunity to prepare for the writing-intensive nature of the Political Science and International Affairs majors. Therefore, the assignments are geared towards higher-order thinking, stressing critical and analytical skills, information literacy, and abstract thinking ability. This process culminates with a 12-15 page, double-spaced research paper (the equivalent of 3,000 to 3,750 words) to familiarise the students with the assessment requirements of upper-division courses. Students spend the entire semester working on the research paper, a process which would consist of many preparatory assignments including an annotative bibliography, detailed outline, and perhaps several rough drafts.

Figure 4: Online video screenshot

Most students attending the Introduction to Political Science have never written a formal research paper or done any in-depth research, and this course helps them to develop the appropriate competences. As a result, university faculty and students work very closely with teaching librarians to acquire research and information literacy competencies, such as: distinguishing popular sources from scholarly and peer-reviewed ones; choosing the proper Political Science databases for research; and properly evaluating and using the sources retrieved to avoid any ethical and copyright issues. The use of LibGuides has been integral to this entire process. Over the course of several semesters, the LibGuide for this course typically receives roughly 500 hits. Easier access to quality information alone does not guarantee student success or improvement, although by using the guide in this course, i.e. integrating the use of the guide in their research practice, students may be likely to use LibGuides in subsequent upper-division courses (although a full evaluation of this is not discussed in this paper).

One such upper-division Political Science course is American Political Theory. Students in this course are required to write several analytical and research papers

on relatively narrow, historically-based topics that require access to primary and secondary sources in addition to peer-reviewed and scholarly journals. As a result, research for this course can be more difficult than in other courses. The LibGuide makes the research process much easier for the students in this course because it features sources, databases, and resources that are germane to the subject matter, including first-hand newspaper accounts of the Revolutionary War, the original Federalist Papers, and U.S. Supreme Court cases. The last time this course was taught, the LibGuide received over 900 hits, which suggests that the students found this a useful resource.

Figure 5: American Political Theory databases page screenshot
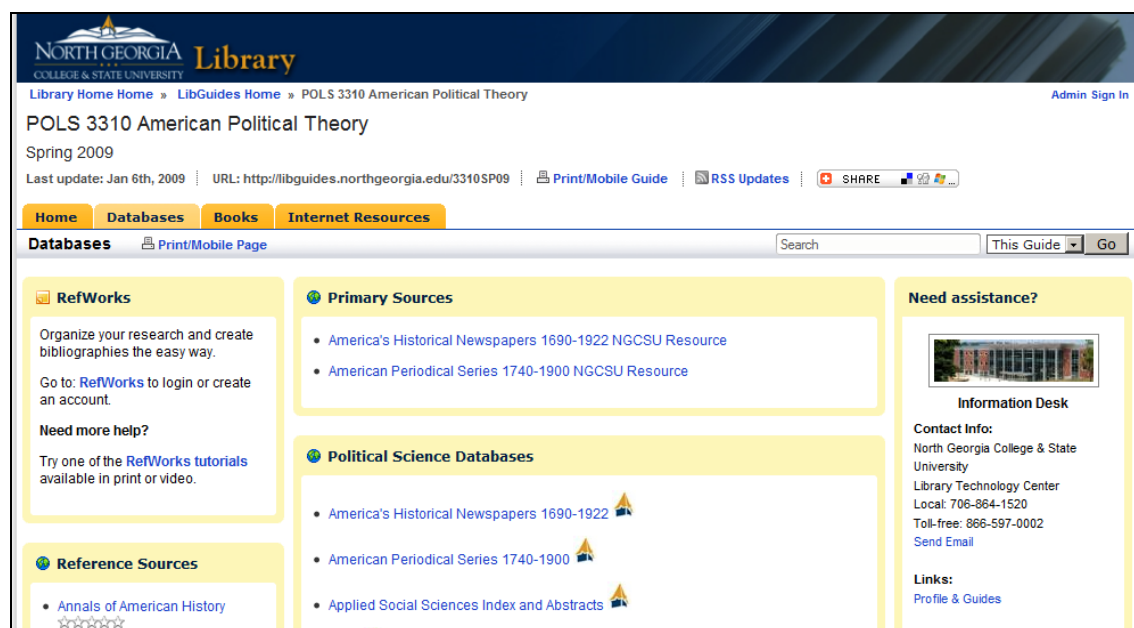
LibGuides have been a valuable resource for both Introduction to Political Science and American Political Theory, most notably by offering increased access to relevant and topical information. As mentioned earlier, most students in Introduction to Political Science have not undertaken rigorous academic research and the LibGuide aids them in accessing and evaluating pertinent information in relevant journals of Political Science. Anecdotal evidence shows that by the time the students take American Political Theory or other upper-division courses, their experience in research and exposure to LibGuides enables them to better focus and streamline their research efforts.

3.2 Broadening the Use of LibGuides to subject areas: Middle Eastern Politics

LibGuides can also be used across courses in which subject matters overlap. One of the authors has developed a common LibGuide for three upper-division courses in a sub-discipline of Political Science, International Affairs spanning respectively the domestic (Middle East Political Systems), international (International Relations Middle East), and economic politics (Political Economy Middle East) of the Middle East. Even though these courses are functionally separate and have different assignments utilising different theoretical foundations, the issues and factual information they reference come from common sources than can be introduced in a single Middle East LibGuide.

Primarily intended for majors in International Affairs, these courses also attract students of Political Science, History, and Criminal Justice taking electives for their major. It follows that these students may take all of these individual courses in the order of their choice or may opt to attend only one. As a result these students may not have any knowledge of Middle Eastern politics, the languages of the region, or be familiar with advanced undergraduate courses.

The practical effect of this array of students means the instructor cannot guarantee a baseline of knowledge or experience in locating relevant sources, and must provide the foundations of Middle Eastern Politics for all the students enrolled in any of these three courses. A common LibGuide is therefore a particularly effective way to establish a single location through which research and reading on Middle Eastern political issues begins. For example, students might study Iraq in each of the three courses, charting the political progress of parliament in the domestic politics course, the burgeoning oil industry in the economics course, and the internal and external displacement of citizens after the 2003 U.S. invasion in the international politics course. A single Middle East LibGuide contains useful links to a range of peer-reviewed, professional and journalistic sources, enabling a starting point for reading and student research, which bypasses the unfamiliarity many students experience when they approach a new subject matter. These sources include a wide variety of pre-screened international newspapers from the Western and Middle Eastern perspective in English, as well as access to databases such as Lexis-Nexis and Columbia International Affairs Online, which are specifically designed for the sub-discipline of International Affairs. Given that many students do enroll in more than one course in the series, the Middle East LibGuide is an essential connective portal that shows students how the domestic political and economic system of a country and region determines its international relations and vice versa.

Figure 6: Middle East Politics LibGuide screenshot
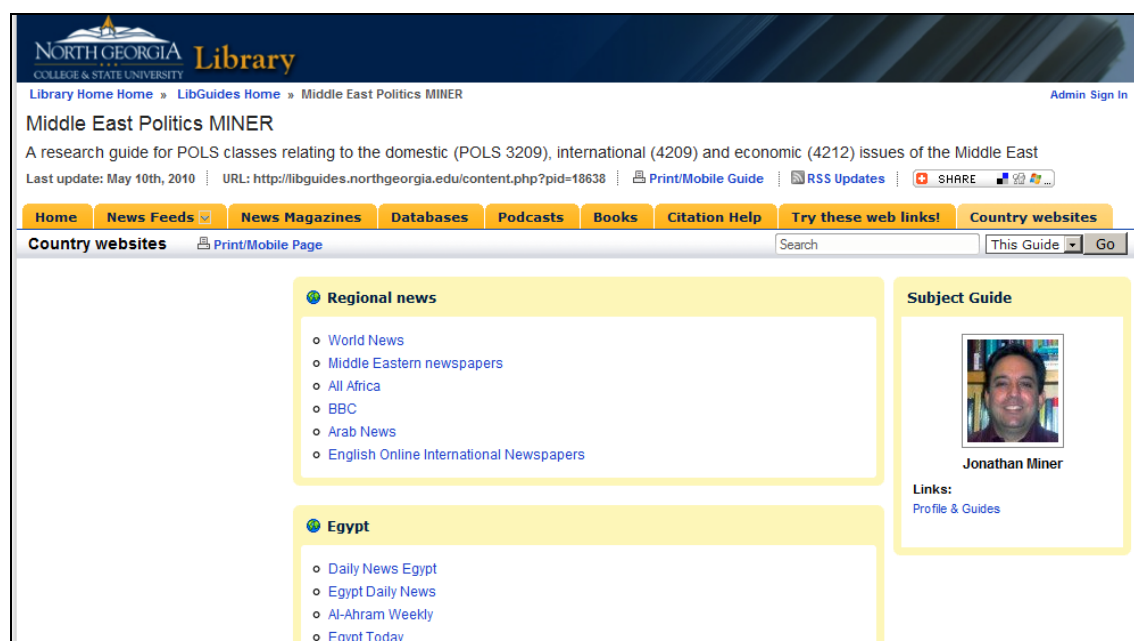
Complementary courses with evidentiary sources are also useful to students in the Middle East Politics courses. For example, another faculty member in the Department of History and Philosophy maintains LibGuides in Modern Middle Eastern History and the Mongol Conquests. This overlap of LibGuides' use is also

prevalent within the English department, the Business School, and the Departments of Biology, History, Psychology, and Criminal Justice. Each discipline develops a number of individual LibGuides which are used by students inside their respective academic major as well as students within any discipline at the university. As LibGuides are available through a portal, open to anyone in the campus community that accesses the Library home page, when students browse the LibGuides listing on the Library home page they see all available guides in one location as shown in the screen shot below.

Figure 7: Browse LibGuides page screenshot
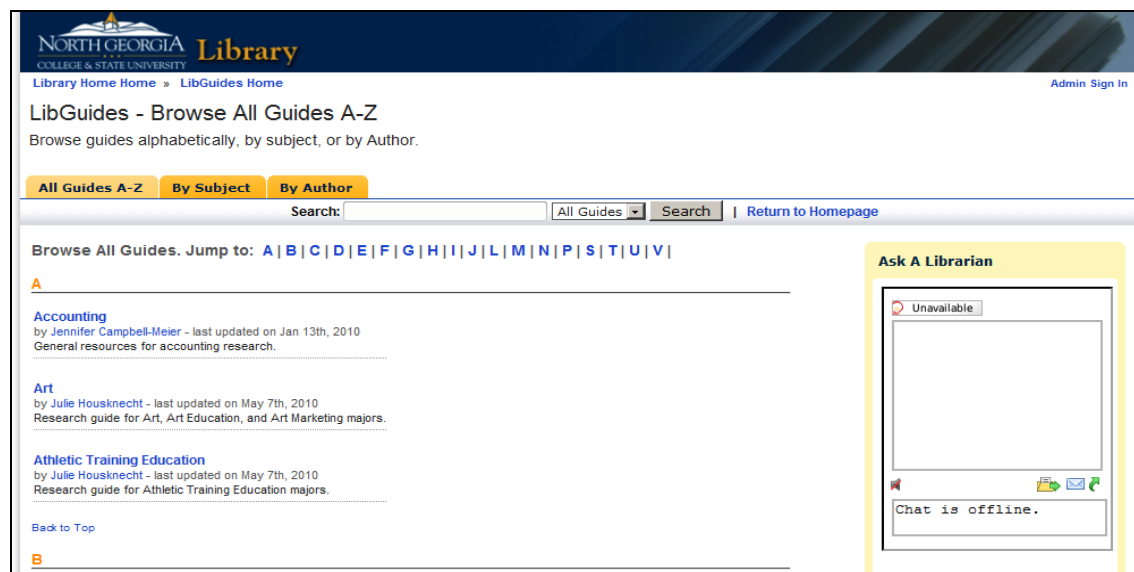
3.3 LibGuides as a Supplement for the Academic Advisor

Another area in which LibGuides are being used is to assist the academic advisor. At North Georgia, faculty members serve as advisors for a limited number of students in their specific academic disciplines. This role entails explaining degree requirements, assisting students in course selection, and mapping a scholastic plan for degree completion. It also often includes internship supervision, study abroad advice, future employment guidance and recommendations.

As an online introduction to a degree programme and its requirements, a LibGuide can provide a 24-hour online source for students. One of the authors of this article and several colleagues in the Political Science Department at North Georgia have collaborated with Library professionals to create a LibGuide for International Affairs majors, providing general information on the degree requirements and specific instruction on one of its requirements, the internship.

Figure 8: International Affairs page screenshot
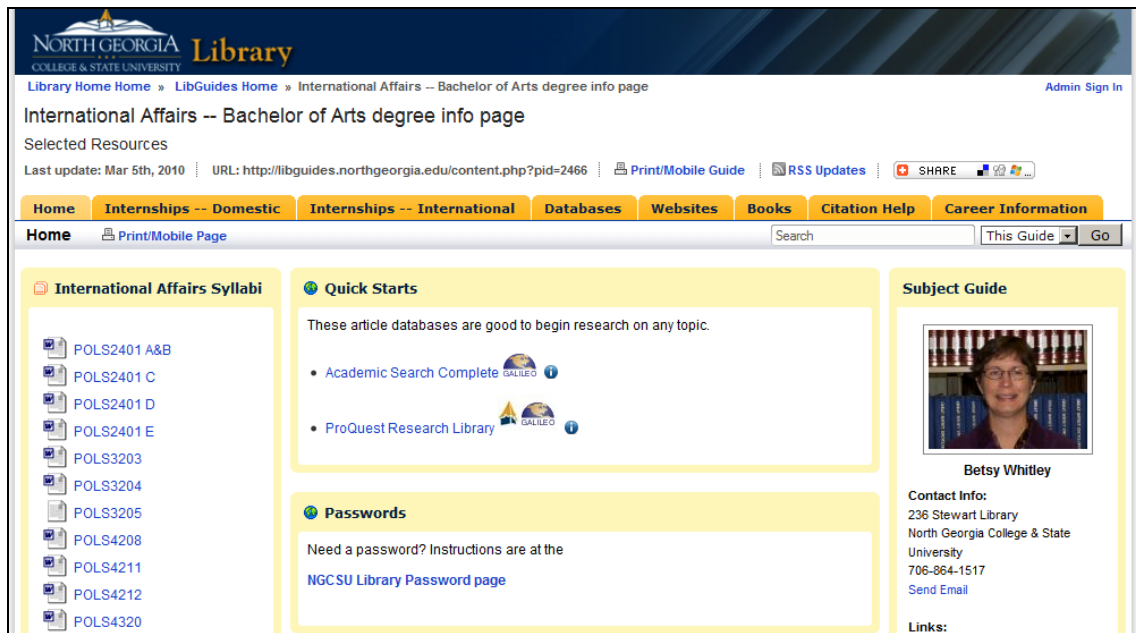
Students must complete an internship as a core component of the International Affairs degree, and they may choose either a domestic or an international internship. The sole mandatory requirements are that the internship must consist of 320 hours of work and be closely tailored to a topic of interest in their region of study: Europe, Latin America, East Asia, or the Middle East. The LibGuide presents a catalogue of available internship options suitable for International Affairs majors, while also providing information about organisations with which North Georgia students currently work or have already completed an internship.

Figure 9: International Affairs domestic internships page screenshot
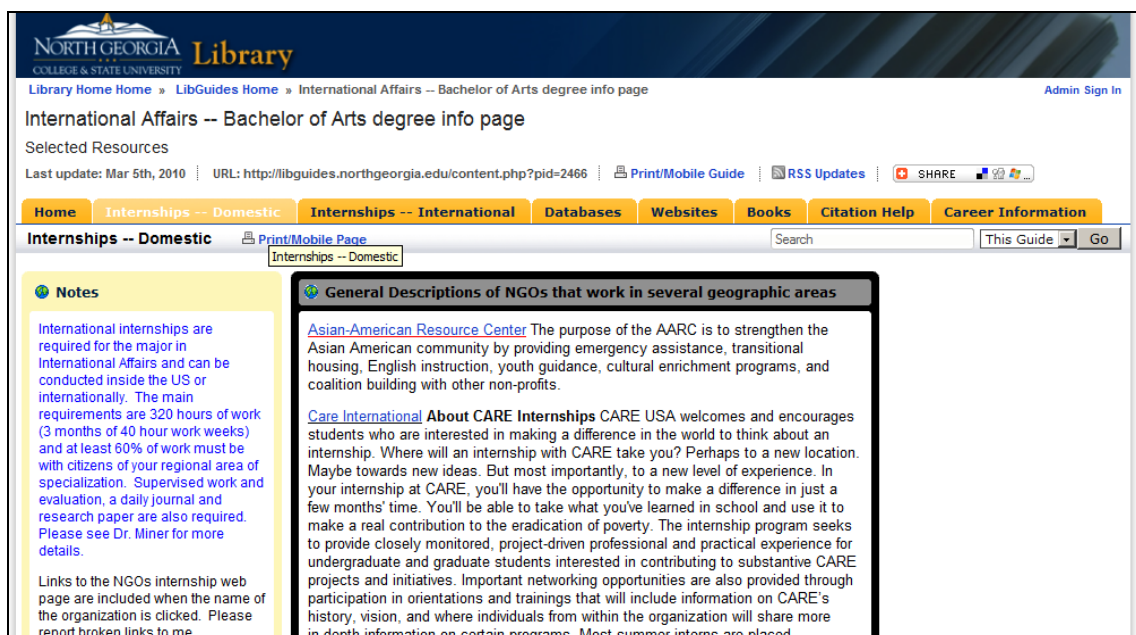
Organized under two separate tabs, "Internships – Domestic" and "Internships – International" the information in the International Affairs LibGuide is then arranged by

region, providing a starting point for students to investigate their options and choose the appropriate internship that fulfills both the academic requirements of their discipline and their own interests. As a particularly independent and self-starting component of the International Affairs degree, this LibGuide is a useful portal for students to begin their research and choose their internship. Like all LibGuides, the International Affairs LibGuide is available through the Library home page 24 hours a day, seven days a week, maximising student access.

Successful internships have placed students with governmental and non-governmental organisations centred around:

1) Issues of immigration and resettlement to the Greater Atlanta Area (Middle East region of study),

2) Economic development in Bulgaria, and military and security issues in Georgia (European region),

3) International trade, and English instruction in China (East Asian region)

4) Literacy, education and social issues in Costa Rica, Mexico and Uruguay (Latin American region).

The LibGuide is also sent by academic advisors to students as an initial reference to help them choose their internship, and its use has increased considerably from 231 hits in 2009, when this guide was created, to 691 hits during the first half of 2010.

## 3.4   Enhancing the Appeal and Effectiveness of LibGuides

Student use of LibGuides does not occur spontaneously, however, and the availability of these resources must be actively promoted by tutors to ensure that the guides are used consistently and effectively. This essentially means that even though a detailed and useful LibGuide might exist to enhance student learning and research, the students will not use it unless they know of its existence and, most importantly, acknowledge its usefulness in completing their assignments.

The introductory course to International Affairs, Global Issues is used here to illustrate this point. This course is taken by students in the International Affairs and Political Science degree programmes, and is also available as an elective for every student at North Georgia. Mandatory across all sections of the course is a five page analytical paper on the modern state system, and unique to this course is the controversy tracker, a current events research project requiring weekly research and written analysis. In the past, the vast majority of students entering this course did not read international news on a daily basis, nor did they have experience in analysing the world system within the context of the global issues that challenge it. For the inexperienced student, the task of writing an analytical paper and a weekly analysis of current events such as the expansion of the European Union, global warming, or the proliferation of nuclear weapons, for example, is quite a daunting task.

One of the authors of this article developed the Global Issues LibGuide at the beginning of the fall 2008 semester with the goal of increasing student research competences. In this first semester, the LibGuide contained instructions for the weekly controversy tracker assignment only, and a total of 75 students logged over 500 uses during a sixteen week course. In the second semester of LibGuide use (spring 2009) the tutor added instructions for the analytical paper as well, resulting in

over 750 hits by a cohort of students of similar size as the one attending the course in the first semester.

Figure 10: Controversy Tracker assignment page screenshot
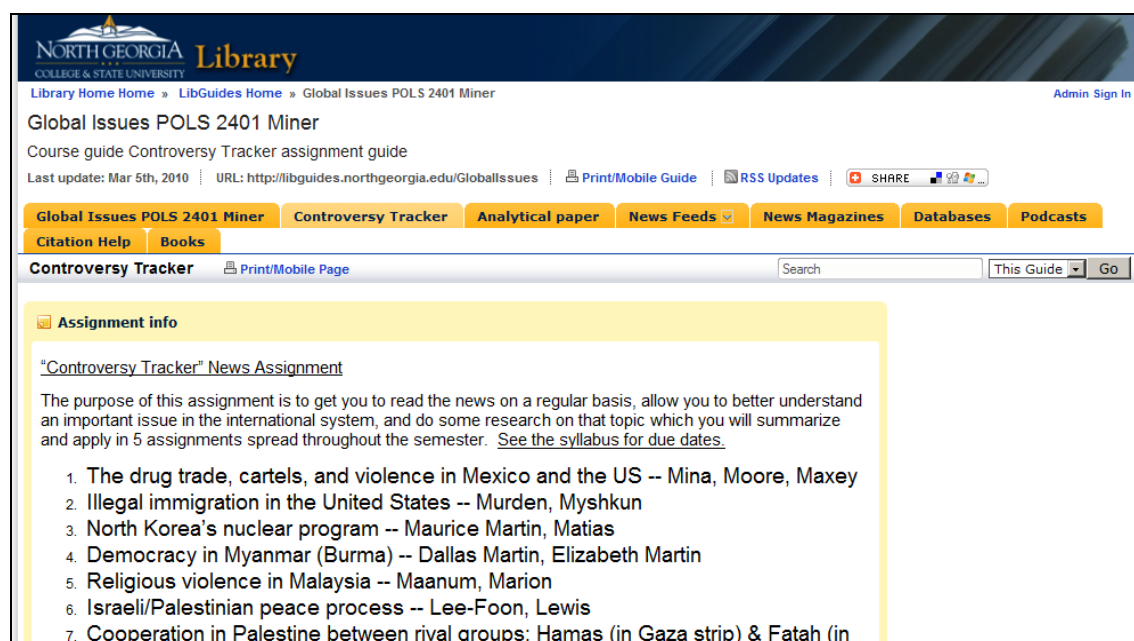
However, while assessing two semesters of student assignments, the tutor noted that even though the number of hits to the LibGuide had increased, the quality of student research and adherence to instructions remained uneven. Most students were properly utilising the LibGuide for research and assignment guidelines, although a number of students bypassed these instructions and used the less complete syllabus instructions while others used only class notes and limited instructor advice. In sum, it was clear that not all students took advantage of the complete set of instructions and research tips provided by this LibGuide.

For the following semester, fall 2009, directions for both the controversy tracker and analytical paper assignments were removed from the syllabus and placed solely within the LibGuide and students were directed to these instructions during class. This had the intended effect of forcing the students consult the LibGuide for detailed information.

Figure 11: LibGuide use in Global Issues course

Academic Semester	Total hits LibGuide	Theory Paper hits	Theory Paper Average Score*	Current Events hits	Current Events Average Score*
spring 2010	1815	378	85.9%	470	86.5
fall 2009	1957	439	84.2	442	84
spring 2009	786	200	84.1	85	86.5
fall 2008	522	0	83.2	78	89.6

*Each semester course had between 77-80 students; Average percentage scores are out of 100%.

The above table is not indicative of a causal relation between LibGuide use and student performance, as there are many influencing factors that affect the students'

performance, such as motivation, intelligence, and the teaching effectiveness of the instructor. Nevertheless this table suggests that there is a relationship between the increasing use of the Global Issues LibGuide and student performance on the theory paper and current events assignments. However, the main point that can be made here is that by placing the instructions and details of the full assignments, research tips, and citation examples exclusively in the LibGuide the instructor is able to provide a far more detailed, thorough, and valuable guide for research and writing than could possibly be contained in a syllabus alone or a series of face-to-face meetings with individual students.

4.   Reflections on the limitations of the Study and aspects that require further investigation

In the authors' professional experience, LibGuides have proven to be a valuable asset to improving student research, yet their ultimate effectiveness and use at North Georgia cannot be conclusively shown, as we have not yet embarked on a full-scale evaluation of the guides' impact. A logical next step in determining the effectiveness of LibGuides would be to examine the students' experience of the guides, and to investigate the impact of LibGuides on the quality of student assignments. The authors' experience indicates that students are aware of LibGuides and use them, but it remains to be seen to what extent students see these guides as valuable and continue to use them as they progress in their degree. One future target is to evaluate the use of the Introduction to Political Science LibGuide in upper-division research papers and the use of the Middle Eastern Politics LibGuide in all three International Affairs courses to test the effectiveness of these guides in enhancing students' research practice.

Bias is another concern which needs to be explored and assessed in the creation of LibGuides. It is the responsibility of the tutor and librarian to frame the LibGuide with as many diverse opinions and varying sources as possible to reduce the possibility of bias. Testing must be done which will provide an independent evaluation to ensure that individual LibGuides are not merely substituting one bias (of the student, for example) for another (such as the instructor or librarian).

A third aspect that requires further investigation concerns the degree to which tutors and librarians encourage the use of LibGuides across subject disciplines to support research and provide academic advice. Surveys exploring the level of awareness and use of the LibGuides to students and the university community at large are necessary to ascertain whether the disseminating practices employed by the authors of the LibGuides are effective in encouraging student use of these resources. Faculty staff and librarians across the university use LibGuides in their courses, although their professional experience indicates that the collective coordination and promotion of LibGuides is just beginning.

Whilst all of these concerns are beyond the scope of this paper, it is widely acknowledged at North Georgia that these issues need be explored in order to test the nature and effectiveness of LibGuides. Our institution currently assesses information literacy in relation to stated learning outcomes in specifically-designated upper-division courses in all subject disciplines through a formal and permanent committee. It is the authors' intention to employ a similar process to test the effectiveness of LibGuides in the near future.

5. Conclusion

Our experience has shown that LibGuides have made a positive impact on the information literacy competences of students at North Georgia College & State University. LibGuides are flexible, personalised research assistance tools useful for a variety of courses and purposes, providing a gateway to resources that are easy for students to access, navigate, and use. Based on a common template, the guides foster collaboration and enable faculty and library staff to share their research knowledge and experience with undergraduate students. LibGuides are useful in lower-division and upper-division courses, broad and narrow subject matter, and as a supplemental reference for faculty advisors.

In those disciplines where paper writing remains a valuable assessment tool, the acquisition of IL skills is of paramount importance (Williams et al., 2006). Effective writing in Political Science is based on analytical thought as well as competent research, and in the authors' experience the LibGuides provide a tool to help accomplish these goals, while at the same time minimising the challenges of writing research papers, finding primary sources in specialized topics, and accessing international news sources to explore unfamiliar global issues.

In conclusion, LibGuides help to ensure that course goals are translated into fully-achieved learning outcomes and complement the efforts of faculty and library professionals as they seek to increase knowledge, analysis, and writing capability in students. LibGuides seem popular with students because they frame and simplify the research process, enabling them to overcome their lack of research experience. Though research is needed to prove their ultimate effectiveness at North Georgia, the LibGuide approach shows promise as an effective means of developing research-savvy and therefore information literate students.

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