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Student Perceptions of the Efficacy of a Required Information Literacy Test in the First Academic Year
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ABSTRACT
This paper reports on how one university attempts to instruct all incoming students on information literacy fundamentals using an asynchronous test supported by a suite of related materials. The paper explores how students interpret the efficacy of this model as they move further along in their academic career. Using a mixed-methods approach, with the majority of data being obtained through focus groups, the researchers (librarians employed in the library through which the test is developed), reflect on the advantages and disadvantages to this model, and suggest improvements to further ensure student engagement with this type of information literacy instruction and assessment.

KEYWORDS
Library orientation for college students; Information literacy – study and teaching; Web based instruction; Focus groups

INTRODUCTION
Students who come to the university without experience of completing complex assignments that require the use of source materials as evidence of claims or lack awareness of the role information literacy plays in scholarly endeavors, are placed at an immediate disadvantage. Librarians seek to address this problem by providing entering students with some form of library intervention to set them up for early academic success. Multiple models address various first-year student information skills. These different approaches depend on factors, such as how students enter the university, the size of the first-year class, and the staffing of the library instruction.

Many libraries take the path of participating in, or teaching, first-year seminar (FYS) courses. The success of this approach assumes an institution has a FYS, students take it seriously, and librarians are invited to teach in that space. Another approach is providing library instruction in first-year composition or writing courses (FYC or FYW) that students must take upon matriculation. This path assumes a library has the staffing capacity to teach in each section of a course that may have 50+ sections. The traditional “one shot” model of library instruction can be used to meet this need; however, in the authors’ experience, first-year writing faculty would like librarians to attend multiple meetings of their classes.

James Madison University (JMU) is a public, comprehensive undergraduate institution located in Harrisonburg, in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. JMU’s student body consists of approximately 20,000 undergraduates and 1,900 graduate students. JMU’s typical entering first year class is approximately 4,500 to 5,000 students, who are primarily residents in on-campus housing and attend classes in-person.

Entering first year students are enrolled in JMU’s core curriculum in their first academic year. The core curriculum is comprised of 41 credit hours spread across five “clusters” of courses. The program is outcomes-based; students pick from courses that meet shared learning outcomes versus choosing from a list of courses identified by disciplinary departments. In their first year at JMU, students complete Cluster One of General Education, Foundational Skills. Cluster One consists of first year composition, the basic communication course, a critical thinking course, and an information literacy test (nine credit hours and a test). For over twenty years, JMU has had information literacy learning outcomes embedded
in the General Education program within Cluster One of General Education. All of these foundational requirements must be completed within the student’s first academic year. The writing, communication, and critical thinking learning outcomes are demonstrated via the completion of a 15-week course (or its transfer equivalent), the information literacy requirement is demonstrated with a passing score on a competency test, known as the “MREST” (Madison Research Essential Skills Test). The MREST is the information literacy test examined by the researchers, in this paper.

Information Literacy Outcomes

The information literacy test requirement began in 2000 when a beta version of the first test was administered to a small number of students. Under the guidance of test development experts in JMU’s Assessment Office, librarians created and maintained an instrument that met reliability and validity requirements. That year, JMU’s General Education program was revised. The cluster model was implemented, and the then-new Association for College and Research Libraries’ (ACRL) Information Literacy Standards for Higher Education were adopted almost verbatim as information literacy learning outcomes within the General Education curriculum. An existing print library workbook was converted to a set of online modules, and delivery of the workbook/web tutorials was established within a basic communication course. In 2016, a group of librarians from JMU Libraries worked to update those outcomes as informed by the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education.

Delivering Instruction

The entering first year class at JMU comprises approximately 4,500 to 5,000 students and continues to grow. JMU Libraries has one faculty librarian and an Assessment Office graduate student formally dedicated to the work of delivering information literacy outcomes in the first year with other assistance as available. An almost 5,000:2 (library) instructor to student ratio mandates that we automate as much of our process as possible. Ninety-eight percent of first year students take JMU’s basic communication course (SCOM 121). Librarians have crafted tutorials for the MREST, using the moniker “MREST Toolkit” as modules in the Canvas learning management system. These modules include the video components seen on the public website, but also quizzes (not publicly accessible) embedded in each section of the communication course. Faculty teaching sections of SCOM 121 assign these modules to their students. After students complete the modules and quizzes, they are assigned to complete the MREST in a proctored assessment computer lab. Students must achieve a passing score and may achieve a passing at advanced level score. Once the student meets the competency standard, this status is documented on their transcript and the requirement is met. Students may take the test as many times as they need to in order to pass (most students pass by their second or third attempt) but failing to meet the standard prior to the spring semester deadline will result in an academic hold on their account thereby, prohibiting them from registration for sophomore level courses.

The MREST Toolkit Tutorials

The Toolkit comprises a set of 15 videos that reside on JMU Libraries’ website. The first two videos serve as introductions to the content that will follow and work to introduce new students to JMU Libraries’ facilities and services, with the remaining 13 videos addressing learning outcomes. None of the videos exceeds a running time in excess of nine minutes, and a transcript of each video is provided to assist with accessibility requirements. Web analytics data indicates that a majority of students who begin the videos watch them through to the end.

The Toolkit includes practice exercises for faculty teaching SCOM 121 to embed into their Canvas courses, with the practice exercises being mapped to the learning outcomes — this model replicates the MREST, itself. Following completion of the practice exercises, the students are in a position to attempt the MREST.

Aims of this Paper

This paper aims to report the findings of a study, using focus groups to gather and analyze the
opinions of students exposed to the MREST and the MREST Toolkit during the course of their studies in SCOM 121. A primary area of interest for the researchers involved student attitudes towards the quality and content of the video tutorials. Given library staffing levels, asynchronous online instruction using video tutorials is the only realistic method for delivering instruction to 4,500 to 5,000 entering students over the course of one academic year. As JMU Libraries has invested much time and effort in developing and maintaining the test and its supporting materials, the researchers wished to learn about student perceptions of the test and materials. The team chose to use a qualitative methodology in which participants were encouraged to speak freely about their experiences and perceptions. The authors seek to report what students think about the product of those efforts using content analysis to describe reasons for their attitudes. Using this approach, improvements to the MREST and its Toolkit can be developed in a student-centered manner.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Why Use Video Tutorials?

Over a decade ago, Dewan and Steevelworthy (2013) reported a strong increase in distance learning in the university setting, readily fulfilled by the use of video tutorials.

There are several benefits to using online video tutorials to provide information literacy instruction. Video tutorials may be viewed at any time or place convenient to the student (Bowles-Terry et al., 2010). Videos may also be viewed as many times as a student chooses to view them, which may be helpful for students who like to learn independently and at their own pace. Video tutorials that are equipped with closed captioning can also be helpful for non-native English speakers or students who have auditory disabilities (Bowles-Terry et al).

Will Students Use Them?

While some students may express the belief that there is “no need” to watch video tutorials and others express “no interest” in the tutorials, a majority of students asked about video tutorials report a willingness to explore and view the online content (Colosimo & Kasuto, 2012).

Students have shown a preference for video tutorials that are succinct and relevant (Keba et al., 2015). Many universities have begun using video mini-series to aid in library instruction, which are a series of one-minute-long videos that explain a topic (Rush and Stott, 2014), with related feedback from students being positive. When assessing the preferences of video tutorials that were designed specifically for nursing students, Baker (2014) found that the students had preferences for four characteristics when it came to video tutorials: 1. Length, 2. Pace of narration, 3. Visibility of screen images, and 4. Frequency/number of callouts (a callout is typically a short burst of textual information appearing on the screen). The nursing students in this study showed preferences for videos that were about one to three minutes in length, had a pace of about three words per second, were in full screen, and contained less than four callouts per minute.

Weeks and Putman Davis (2016) sought to describe best practices in creating online tutorials for the purposes of information literacy instruction. Focusing on one specific task (finding a book in an online catalog), the authors identified definite learning outcomes, brevity, the use of visual clues to draw viewers’ attention to key components, engaging content and delivery, basic assessment, and marketing/publicizing the video as mandatory elements to a successful tutorial. Reflecting upon the piloting of their tutorial, Weeks and Putman Davis noted the importance of delivery, having received feedback that “unnatural” or “robotic” delivery distracts the viewer, as does narration that “sound[s] too much like reading a script. The emphasis on publicizing the tutorial is of more relevance to the MREST and its Toolkit than might be imagined, at first glance. While the MREST Toolkit materials are deliberately brought to the attention of their intended audience by SCOM 121 instructors, it must be borne in mind that this vicarious publicizing removes librarians from that process, and the question of how the third-party instructor chooses to describe the materials may be of some significance.
**Required Information Literacy Testing**

As is the case at JMU, University at Buffalo (UB) students are required to take and pass an information literacy skills test at some point before graduating from the university. When Walsh (2011) surveyed students to find out their views on the information literacy skills test at UB, many of them expressed the idea that the information included on the test would be very useful to know and would help them be successful in their research endeavors but suggested turning the test into a one-credit requirement instead of just having it be a graduation requirement. This suggests that adding a reward, in this case a single credit, might influence and encourage students to take the information literacy skills tests more seriously. Students at UB who took the test during their senior year or just months before graduating suggested that the test should be required to be taken within the first year of attending UB (Walsh), which is currently the requirement for students at JMU University.

**METHODOLOGY**

**Participants**

The research was conducted after the approval of an IRB Protocol by JMU’s Office of Research Integrity. Students enrolled in SCOM 121 are typically aged 17 to 20. The consent form stipulated only students 18 years or older could participate, in order to assure that no minors were involved in the study. No inducements were provided for participating in the research; participants were advised that they were free to withdraw from the research at any time, with no adverse consequences. The researchers requested no personal identifying information (such as the names of speakers at the focus groups); any personal identifying information volunteered by participants was scrubbed from the data set prior to content analysis.

$N=41$ (Focus Group Section #1: $n=15$; Focus Group Section 2: $n=12$; Focus Group Section 3: $n=14$).

The research team conducted focus groups during the spring assessment day. JMU reserves two assessment days (one in the fall semester, the other in the spring semester of each academic year) for the assessment research center to collect longitudinal data on student learning and development outcomes. Participation in the fall assessment day is a requirement of all first year students. Students involved in the spring assessment day are a mix of students who have completed 60 to 90 credit hours at JMU or another institution (transfer students). Focus group participants were purposefully recruited from the spring assessment day sample in order to represent various majors across the university. At least one participant from each JMU college attended each focus group session. Participants were informed of this purposeful sampling and were encouraged to reflect on their college and major in relation to other participants’ colleges and majors.

**Study Design**

Three face-to-face semi-structured focus groups were conducted in which participants gradually filled out a questionnaire that was used to stimulate discussion. Following completion of the questionnaire, the researchers led a general discussion guided by the questionnaire. The participants’ answers in the questionnaire booklets, and transcriptions of the focus group discussions, were then subjected to content analysis. The study design represents a mixed methods approach, allowing for collection of quantitative data about participants’ levels of interaction with the materials, in conjunction with qualitative data recording participants’ opinions and observations about the materials, themselves.

**Description of Data Collection Instrument**

The data collection instrument (Appendix B) consisted of nine single-choice and short-answer questions that asked students for their impressions of the MREST and their awareness and use of the materials included in the MREST Toolkit.
Method Choice
The focus group method was chosen because the social environment created by it offered an ideal way to acquire detailed qualitative data from students in a relaxed and non-threatening manner. The sessions were facilitated by a guided-conversation technique.

Setting
Three face-to-face semi-structured focus group sessions were held consecutively on the same day; the sessions took place in a classroom with tables and seating arranged in a circle in the center of the room to facilitate conversation. The facilitator sat with a projector screen behind them where questions and other information were displayed over the course of each session. The remainder of the research team sat to the side of the room and sometimes asked participants follow-up questions. The full research team introduced themselves at the beginning of each session, and identified themselves as part of the team researching student perceptions of the test/tutorial suite. The classroom setting was chosen because assessment day is conducted across campus in reserved classrooms; a classroom with movable seating was requested to accommodate the circular seating pattern needed for the sessions.

Process
Each focus group session lasted one hour. Stimulus material, in the form of a questionnaire, was presented in both paper booklets and projections on a screen behind the facilitator. Sessions progressed through stages defined by question groups on each page in the booklet. Participants turned pages, moving to the next stage, only when asked. During each stage, participants were prompted to write their responses to questions in their booklets. After all participants finished responding to questions in writing, they were invited to share their answers and reflect on each other’s perspectives and reasoning.

Description of Discussion Guide and Questionnaire Booklet
The discussion guide directed the facilitator and research team to conduct each session in a consistent manner. The guide addressed such things as: what participants would be doing during the session; what the facilitator and research team would be doing; how the research team would handle the data; transitions between discussion sections; neutral facilitator language examples; instructions for particular questions; and follow-up questions considering different issues. See Appendix A for the discussion guide.

The participants’ questionnaire booklet was divided into five thematic sections:
1. What is information literacy?
2. Communication about required test
3. Rationale of the required test
4. Did the required test help you?
5. Conclusion

Each section was treated individually as participants were instructed to turn pages in their booklets at specified times. At the beginning of each section, participants were asked to respond to each question in writing and to quietly wait until everyone was finished before discussion would begin. To assure shared understanding of the directions and discussion question language, the booklet text was projected onto the screen behind the facilitator as the session progressed through each stage.

Reporting Reflexivity
The facilitator and research team identified themselves as JMU librarians at the beginning of each session. To create a welcoming atmosphere, the facilitator reiterated that the purpose of the study was to gather student perceptions of the tutorial/test with the goal of improving it based on their experiences.
The researchers addressed bias by leveraging the sample’s unique awareness of assessment in higher education. All assessment day participants must view a brief, humorous video about assessment day at the beginning of their session. The video explains that assessment day is an essential part of the cycle of data-driven improvements to which the university is committed, and how it contributes to the quality of their education; the video also emphasizes the significance of assessment as a part of campus culture at JMU because classes are not held on assessment days and selected students are required to participate.

The team leveraged the awareness of assessment practices to address response bias, specifically social desirability bias and acquiesce bias, at the beginning and throughout each session. Participants were continually reminded they were contributing to assessment day by sharing their impressions of a significant test all rising sophomores must pass, and that their feedback would help future students. The facilitator specifically tried to address social desirability bias, the desire to provide answers perceived to be desirable by their peers or facilitators, by phrasing questions and discussion in a manner that invited participants to feel accepted, and listened to—no matter what their views were. Acquiescence bias, the instinct to agree with questions or statements based on their phrasing, was addressed by using neutral language in the booklet and during the discussion by encouraging counterpoints in discussion.

Data were coded separately by two of the librarian researchers and a graduate student from the university’s assessment research center. The coders met to methodically review data and their codes, adjudicating differences within the content analysis.

**Limitations**

The number of focus group or interview sessions held is ideally based on when data saturation occurs (Hancock et al., 2016; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009; Guest et al., 2006) however, the team could only hold a maximum of three sessions given the assessment day schedule. Even with this limitation, the team detected emergent themes within and across sessions. Additionally, Onwuegbuzie et al. recommend holding multiple sessions to uncover and test themes in an exploratory study using focus groups, which the team chose to do.

**FINDINGS**

**Quantitative Data from Questionnaire Booklets**

These data take the form of participants’ recorded responses to questions about their interaction with the MREST and the MREST Toolkit.

1. **(Question 2.2 in questionnaire booklet)**
   
   *Did one of your first-year instructors assign you to watch the MREST tutorial videos?*

   - 61% (25 students) were assigned to watch the MREST tutorial videos by a first-year instructor.
   - 32% (13 students) were not assigned to watch the MREST tutorial videos by a first-year instructor.
   - 7% (3 students) responded this item did not apply to them.

2. **(Question 2.2.1 in questionnaire booklet)**
   
   *If you were assigned to watch the videos, did you watch them?*

   - 54% (22 students) responded “yes.”
   - 15% (6 students) responded “no.”
   - 13 participants did not respond (32%)

3. **(Question 2.3 in questionnaire booklet)**
   
   *Did you complete the MREST practice quizzes embedded in your SCOM 121 Canvas course?*
68% (28 students) responded “yes.”
24% (10 students) responded “no.”
7% (3 students) responded that this item did not apply to them

4. (Question 2.3.1 in questionnaire booklet)
If you were assigned to take the quizzes, did your instructor give credit/points for completing them?
• 46.3% (19 students) who were assigned to take the quizzes, received credit/points for completing them.
• 29.3% (12 students) who were assigned to take the quizzes did not receive credit/points for completing them.
• 10 participants did not respond to this item (24.4%).

Qualitative Data from Questionnaire Booklets and Related Focus Group Discussion
Data are expressed thematically following content analysis of the transcripts generated from focus group discussions. Participants’ written responses in questionnaire booklets were analyzed in light of these identified themes.

Table 1: Qualitative data collected within focus group discussions and codified by theme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Number of instances</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication about / awareness of MREST and Toolkit</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions of MREST goals</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test / tutorial quality</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test-taking strategies</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past experience / familiarity with test content</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preference for face-to-face information literacy instruction</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responses irrelevant to the research study’s aims</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Communication about / awareness of MREST and toolkit
Overwhelmingly students are hearing of the MREST requirement from their instructors teaching in SCOM 121. This is good, as that is where they are supposed to hear about the requirement. Many faculty who teach in these classes require that the test be completed as part of the eventual course grade. Some students noted that they heard of the requirement in a different general education first year course (Critical Thinking or First Year Composition were noted). One student noted that they heard of the requirement from their first-year advisor as advisors can see completion upon reviewing an advisee’s transcript. Students reported that they heard of the requirement from peers (roommates, first year peer advisors, orientation experiences, and older students). Students also mentioned reminder email messages from the General Education Administrative office to meet the deadline, and finding information regarding the requirement at the General Education program’s website.

Less encouragingly, “word of mouth” communication about the MREST and its materials suggests that students’ perceptions of the materials may be influenced by those third parties’ opinions:

“I didn’t watch it, but my professor gives a fair warning of how awful [it is].”

“Like, some people say it’s really easy and take it once and then like I have one friend who took it like six times and hated every bit of it.”

“I mean, like honestly, like it’s like most of the kids aren’t even paying attention in class. So, basically,
you just hear from that one kid who happened to listen and remembered the date and then everyone
freaks out and takes it the next day.”

One participant provided a consideration of how better marketing of MREST and the MREST
Toolkit by the library may encourage students to approach it more positively:

“I think make the goals of it more apparent to students because I definitely just treated it like some test
I was cramming for and I didn’t really know the full scope of what you guys are trying to do, so I just
treated it like that and then forgot about it once I was done taking it.”

Participants also expressed frustration at the lack of a uniform approach to the MREST and
Toolkit by instructors teaching across sections of SCOM 121. This is of some significance, as perceived
unfairness that some instructors give course credit for completing the MREST or practice tests whereas
others do not, may influence students’ willingness to watch the videos and complete the practice exercises:

“Some professors give credit for it. Others did not.”

“Well, there’s like - isn’t there quizzes for like the videos? Well, I didn’t have to take - they recommended
watching the videos, but I didn’t get credit like some other SCOM 121 professors.”

It is noteworthy that 24% of participants reported not completing the practice quizzes within the
MREST Toolkit, and 29% reported that their SCOM 121 course instructor did not provide course credit
for this activity. Hence there is a reasonable suggestion that tying the MREST to for-credit instruction
creates an expectation of credit received. In the absence of such, some students struggle to see the broader
benefits of the MREST.

2. Perceptions of MREST goals

When asked to provide a description of “information literacy” as the opening question in their
questionnaire booklets, the majority of participants approached this question thoughtfully, and many
provided answers which librarians would likely find encouraging and regard as reasonably accurate defi-
nitions of this term. Examples include:

“The ability to define, find, comprehend, and analyze information through proficient, effective re-
search.”

“Being able to competently assess the source of information, its origin, legitimacy, and analyze it in an
objective way.”

As the participants in this study represent JMU students who have already attempted the
MREST, it seems that the MREST is succeeding in one of its primary aims – delivering understanding of
what information literacy actually is. Less encouragingly, however, analysis of participant responses sug-
gests that the students struggle to connect the goals of the MREST with the competencies they have ac-
quired as a result of taking the test. The responses reveal an attitude that the MREST is simply a rather
burdensome item to be “checked off” as a requirement for progression through the university’s curriculum. Some responses indicate that the students undervalue or underestimate the skills they have gained
throughout the process:

“I feel like [the MREST] is again one of those things you just have to check off your list, you’re done
with and then you don’t think about it again. So, for me, which was like okay, I need to pass it, work
through the tutorials, halfway listening, and then took it, passed it, and I was done. And, the same with that, I just clicked through it.”

“Yes because I have to do a lot of like writing and I use the library a lot and like the resources there. And, in terms of what the [the MREST] taught me on how to like use the resources in the library, it like succeeded. But beyond that, I don’t really remember like any of these, like how to like infer things. Like, that really didn’t stick. It was just the like - it prepared me, it like taught me what JMU can do for me in terms of helping me. But beyond that, I think it was kind of just a test I took.”

3. Test / tutorial quality

Responses discussing the quality of the video tutorials, and the participants’ related willingness to use the tutorials, emphasized the need for engaging content and presentation as identified in the Literature Review section of this paper:

“So, my teacher told me about, like, the videos and the quizzes for SCOM and like I tried to watch the videos, but they’re like really boring. I actually like fell asleep during the first one. So, I was like I don’t think I can like make it through it.”

“I just think an interactive person in the video just makes a video better, because if you have like a monotone professor, who’s just like going through the information and that you can clearly see on what you’re watching is really not interesting and not engaging. So, videos can be engaging. It just depends on the type of video and who’s speaking and how they’re speaking and relaying information.”

This complaint about the need for a more interactive approach was repeated as participants reflected on the MREST, itself:

“I feel like the test, if I remember correctly, was so wordy. I was like staring at a screen and then I had to read the question like at least seven times before it really processed in my head. And, I would just - like it got to the point, like, especially towards the end of the test, I just started clicking answers, because I was like my head hurts. Look, I was just at that point. I was like, I can’t keep reading this.”

Other participants described a more prosaic approach, recognizing the value in the test and its materials, but without obvious enthusiasm:

“It seemed to be the norm that you just had to take it and there’s nothing else really said about it, I think. But like after taking it, like I understand why.”

4. Test-taking strategies

The 12 responses about test taking strategies focused, for the most part, on ways to pass the test without engaging with the provided materials. Participants observed:

“I just kept taking it until I passed.”

“I feel like it really didn’t matter, because I didn’t take a look at them and I passed the first time.”

“No. No. Like, I didn’t have quizzes either like our - our professors said that we had quizzes on Canvas and I couldn’t find them and then I remembered, oh there’s videos like online. I was like, oh okay. So, then I watched them, then I took the [test] like yesterday. I passed, but I don’t think the videos helped at all.”

One participant employed this strategy using the practice quizzes rather than the test itself, for
this purpose:

“Okay, so I was like I'm not going to watch them. So, I didn't watch them, but I took like all the quizzes and they're like - the quizzes were almost exactly the same as the questions they asked. So, the quizzes did help me at least, because like I know like which books or which majors are held like in which library. I didn't know that, so like those quizzes did help for like that aspect, but research, I did learn that in high school.”

Only one of these 12 participants discussing test-taking strategies stated that the practice quizzes and tutorials were key components of their success in passing the test. The data revealed that the approach of repeated (uninformed) attempts until finally achieving a passing score was the method favored by the other 11 students – those who discussed this topic from the perspective of avoiding engaging with the Toolkit.

5. Past experience/familiarity with test content

Four participants reported confidently held assumptions that previous (K12) experience would suffice for the purposes of passing the MREST:

“I would say I probably had a good chance of passing it just like right out of high school.”

One participant reflected soberly on this misassumption, after attempting the MREST:

“I mean, like someone brought up like the point about where would I find this book, like what library, like, I would never think that that would be on like [a test]. I didn’t even know what MREST stood for until today. So, there’s just really random stuff like I wasn’t expecting. Like, it was stuff I heard about when I would take like a library class when I was in middle school. That’s what I was remember, but like up until eighth grade, that was the only time I really heard of it and then I went through all of high school, hadn’t heard of any of that stuff, and then I had to come here and like take it and I had no idea that’s what was going to be on the test.”

6. Preference for traditional library instruction

Two participants indicated a preference for traditional, face-to-face library instruction over asynchronous, video-based learning. Such responses were slight variations on the theme described by this student:

“I feel like one way is that like one like lecture day could be devoted to just [this] material [in] your SCOM 121 class. I feel like students would be more likely to actually learn and like retain the information if they went to a lecture and like wrote stuff down instead of just on their own, like saying, you can watch tutorials, but like most people usually don’t.”

DISCUSSION

At the outset, it is important to remember that passing the MREST is a requirement placed on JMU students in order to advance in their studies, enroll and succeed in classes beyond their freshman year, and ultimately graduate from the university. The study reveals that the mandatory nature of the test undoubtedly influences how students approach it, with some participants adopting an approach of it simply being something to be endured and passed as perfunctorily as possible, others accepting it as a requirement of their undergraduate experience at the university and approaching it in a practical manner, and a smaller number of participants seeking to actively learn from the test and its related materials.

Delivering the test in the arena of SCOM 121 is an effective way of ensuring student awareness of
the test and its requirements, but it necessarily involves bringing those course instructors into the process. The study shows that attitudes to the test are formed in the stages of communication about the test, and hence it is reasonable to assume that how an instructor presents the MREST strongly influences a student’s approach to it. Similarly, it is very clear that students in different sections discuss their experiences with their peers – a lack of uniformity in approach, particularly with regard to course credit being either given or not given for completion of the MREST and/or the practice materials, can cause resentment, which, in turn, manifests itself in students who do not receive course credit being disinclined to engage with the learning materials.

One problem with the library creating an asynchronous test and suite of related learning materials, and then working with other members of the university to present it and draw attention to it, is that the library risks becoming the remote partner in the process. This is certainly not the intention, and the MREST and its Toolkit emphasize the accessibility of the library and its librarians, but it is a reality that students, who naturally see more of their course instructors than they do of librarians, with the added complication that the course instructor is the person who assigns grades for their class, may begin to view the test as “belonging” to their SCOM 121 course, which limits their perceptions of the transferability of the skills they have acquired. Resolving this problem may involve the library becoming more proactively involved in the actual marketing of the MREST and its aims and purposes to JMU students.

As stated throughout this paper, the asynchronous method is the only realistic way of providing and assessing this type of instruction to JMU’s entire first year class. However, the mixed attitudes to video instruction reported by the participants reemphasize the discussion in this paper’s literature review regarding best practices for this model. The data supports the literature’s assessment that brevity and interactivity are key components for creating engaging video tutorials. As the suite of videos is revised on a periodic basis, it seems that the current upper limit of nine minutes may be too lengthy to ensure student engagement with the tutorial content; additionally, the narrative approach may need to be replaced with a different communication style, which students regard as more appealing.

A positive element of the research is the revelation that the MREST has done its job – participants demonstrated a retained understanding of information literacy after having successfully completed the MREST. For some, the process of acquiring that knowledge may have been something to be endured rather than welcomed. For others, the test was simply a hurdle to be overcome by whatever means – including plugging away at multiple, unthinking attempts until their desired outcome (a passing score) was obtained, irrespective of the test’s goal of instilling transferable information literacy skills.

CONCLUSION

One conclusion of this paper is reticent acceptance: with asynchronous tests of this type, which necessarily allow for repeated attempts, there will be some students who are difficult to reach – those who believe that avoiding learning materials in preference for throwing mud at a wall until it sticks is the best method for overcoming a bureaucratic impediment. However, in trying to reach those students, the potential exists to improve the experience for all students. The participants in this study demonstrated the benefits of having been exposed to the MREST. Through hearing the observations of those who did complete the process in a manner hoped for by the library and the test’s creators, coupled with the best practices identified by the literature and echoed in the participants’ responses, the opportunity exists to further develop the MREST and its Toolkit, and to re-emphasize the MREST’s aims and purposes and inherent attachment to the library and its staff, for the benefit of future first year students at JMU.

REFERENCES


APPENDIX A
Assessment Day Focus Group
Facilitator Guide

Transition
[Staff member name] will explain what will happen and move everyone to the back of the room.
[Seating will be set in a circle]

Who are we?
[Introductions (all of us) with name and job info.
What's your name and major?

Why are we here?
We're here today to learn about your experiences with the MREST Toolkit (tutorial) and with the MREST.
We want to know if they prepared you for work you’ve done since your first year at JMU.

What we learn from you today will be used by faculty and administrators to help improve MREST.

What will you be doing?
Answer questions in your booklet.
Have a conversation about the responses you wrote.
Ask each other (or the facilitators) if you don’t understand something.
Since we will be recording this session, we ask that you try to refrain from using anyone’s name, or mentioning you own.

** Say anything you like – positive or negative – about your experience.
This is not meant to be a conversation about consensus. **

What will the facilitators be doing?
We will:
record this conversation (only heard by research team and transcriptionist);
guide the conversation;
take notes;
keep the group on topic; and
ask follow-up questions.

Later, we will:
pay an outside contractor to transcribe the recording;
listen to the recording and read the transcription;
read your booklets;
write a report for the faculty and administrators who manage the program; and
destroy the recording of our conversation when we write the report.

Do you have questions before we start?

Do you have any questions about what we are doing?

If you do not understand something, stop us and ask for clarification.
[START THE RECORDERS]

Section 1 – What is Information Literacy?

Question 1:
What is your definition of Information Literacy?

Section 2 – Communication about MREST

Question 1:
How did you find out about the MREST requirement?

Question 2:
Did one of your first-year instructors assign you to watch the MREST Tutorial videos?
Yes | No | Does not apply to me

If you were assigned to watch the videos, did you watch them?
Yes | No

Question 3:
Did you complete the MREST Practice Quizzes embedded in your SCOM100 Canvas course?
Yes | No | Does not apply to me

If you were assigned to take the quizzes, did your instructor give credit/points for completing them?
Yes | No

Question 4:
Did one of your first-year instructors assign you to complete the MREST Test?
Yes | No | Does not apply to me

If you were assigned to complete the test, did you take it successfully at that time?
Yes | No

Question 5:
Did you hear about the test and/or tutorials from outside of class? If so, how, and from whom did you hear about the test and/or videos?

Section 3 – Rationale of MREST

1: Why do you think JMU requires students to complete the MREST requirement?

2: Why do you think JMU requires completion of the MREST within your first year?

Section 4 – Did MREST Help You?

1. Look at Handout 1. Do you believe that the MREST tutorials and test accomplish these learning goals?
Tutorials: Yes | No | Uncertain | Does not apply to me
Test: Yes | No | Uncertain | Does not apply to me

2. Look at Handout 2. Do you agree with this information? Did your information literacy skills increase since you started at JMU?
Yes | No | Uncertain
If you feel your information literacy skills increased over time, what would you attribute that success to?

If you viewed the tutorials, did they contribute to that increase?  
Yes | No | Does not apply

If you feel your information literacy skills have not increased over time, what would help (beyond the MREST tutorials and videos)?

3. Did taking the test improve your information literacy skills?

Section 5 – Conclusion

Please consider your experience with the tutorials and test and answer the following questions. (If you didn’t know that much about either, or didn’t use the tutorials, that’s an experience also.)

1. If you could make a suggestion to the people who make the tutorials, what would you say?

2. If you could make a suggestion to the people who make the test, what would you say?

3. Do you believe the MRE tutorials and test helped prepare you for information literacy requirements in your major?  
Yes | No | Uncertain | Does not apply to me

If so, what about the requirement made research work in your major helpful?
APPENDIX B
Assessment Day Focus Group
Participant Response Packet

Do not place your name on this packet.

Section 1 – Information Literacy
1. What is your definition of information literacy?

Section 2 – Communication About MREST
1. How did you find out about the MREST requirement?

2. Did one of your first-year instructors assign you to watch the MREST Tutorial videos?
   Yes | No | Does not apply to me
   If you were assigned to watch the videos, did you watch them?
   Yes | No

3. Did you complete the MREST practice quizzes embedded in your SCOM100 Canvas course?
   Yes | No | Does not apply to me
   If you were assigned to take the quizzes, did your instructor give credit/points for completing them?
   Yes | No

4. Did one of your first-year instructors assign you to complete the MREST Test?
   Yes | No | Does not apply to me
   If you were assigned to take the test, did you take it successfully at that time?
   Yes | No

5. Did you hear about the test and/or tutorials from outside of class? If so, how and from whom did you hear about the test and/or videos?

Section 3 – Rationale of MREST
1. Why do you think JMU requires students to complete the MREST requirement?

2. Why do you think JMU requires completion of the MREST within the first year?

Section 4 – Did MREST Help You?
1. Look at Handout #1. Do you believe that the MREST tutorials and test accomplish these learning goals?
   Tutorials: Yes | No | Uncertain | Does not apply to me
   Test: Yes | No | Uncertain | Does not apply to me

2. Look at Handout #2. Do agree with this information? Did your information literacy skills increase since you started at JMU?
   Yes | No | Uncertain | Does not apply to me
   If you feel your information literacy skills increased over time, what would you attribute that success to?
   If you viewed the tutorials, did they contribute to that increase?
   Yes | No
   If you feel your information literacy skills have not increased over time, what would help (beyond the MREST tutorials and videos)?

3. Did taking the test improve your information literacy skills?

Section 5 – Conclusion
Please consider your experience with the tutorials and test and answer the following questions. (If you didn’t know that much about either, or didn’t use the tutorials, that’s an experience also.)

1. If you could make a suggestion to the people who make the tutorials, what would you say?

2. If you could make a suggestion to the people who make the test, what would you say?

3. Do you believe the MRE tutorials and test helped prepare you for information literacy requirements in
your major?
Yes | No | Uncertain | Does not apply to me
If so, what about the requirement made research work in your major helpful?

Handout 1 – Cluster One Information Learning Outcomes

The MREST Toolkit, Practice Exercises and the MREST are designed to help you develop and achieve the following student learning outcomes.

- Recognize the components of scholarly work and that scholarship can take many forms.
- Demonstrate persistence and employ multiple strategies in research and discovery processes.
- Identify gaps in their own knowledge and formulate appropriate questions for investigation in academic settings.
- Evaluate the quality of information and acknowledge expertise.
- Use information effectively in their work and make contextually appropriate choices for sharing their own scholarship.
- Use information ethically and legally.

Handout 2 – InfoCore Analysis Comparison