

DePaul University

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June 27, 2014

I felt like such a Freshman: Creating Library Insiders

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“I felt like such a Freshman!”: Creating Library Insiders

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Question:

After participating in a self-guided library activity and reflecting on the process, will students in DePaul’s First Year Experience program be able to articulate how the library can contribute to their success as academic learners? What can we learn about how the library contributes to student learning and engagement?

Why is this important? :

DePaul's Strategic Plan, Vision 2018

DePaul’s commitment to first-generation college students. **33% of our 2013 Freshman class identified as first generation**, meaning that neither parent has a college degree.

Research by Brinkman, Gibson, & Presnell (2013) notes that **first generation students perceive themselves as being outsiders**, and reported that this feeling created stress. “They assumed that their inability to navigate the library with ease was just another instance of their ‘academic cluelessness.’” (2013)

Yeager and Walton (2011) note that brief activities or “**interventions**” which target students’ affect regarding their academic experience can **have large and lasting impact** on education achievement.

Project Information Literacy (2013) reports that in general, **first year students feel overwhelmed** by college level research assignments. Students are **intimidated** by the amount of information they are dealing with for the first time.

We believe that getting students “over themselves” and into the physical library can facilitate student retention and success. Research from University of Minnesota (2013) suggests that first year students **who use the library at least once** during first semester have **higher grade point averages** than their peers, and are **more likely to persist** into the next semester.

According to Ryan (2012) **reflection** helps people to understand the context of their learning and use this knowledge “**to re-imagine and ultimately improve future experience.**”

In addition to completing a physical task, our project asked students to reflect on the experience in the form of a brief reflection essay. **One of the goals of our lesson was to create insiders.** We hoped our assignment would give students a chance to stumble around and maybe fail at first in a safe environment, get over it, and be able to use the library more easily and confidently the second time.

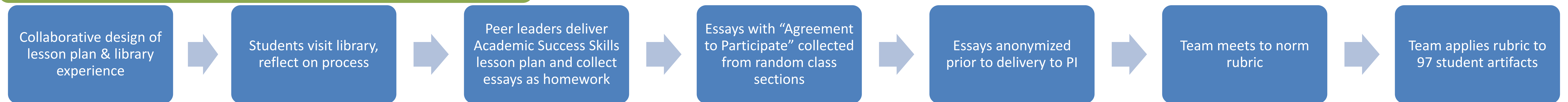
The First Year Student Experience at DePaul University

Chicago Quarter: First year students enroll in classes led by a faculty member, staff member and peer leader. During the “Common Hour,” Peer leaders lead discussions and deliver content on a variety of topics.

We aimed to build students’ identity as scholars, and address their anxiety regarding new spaces and experiences.

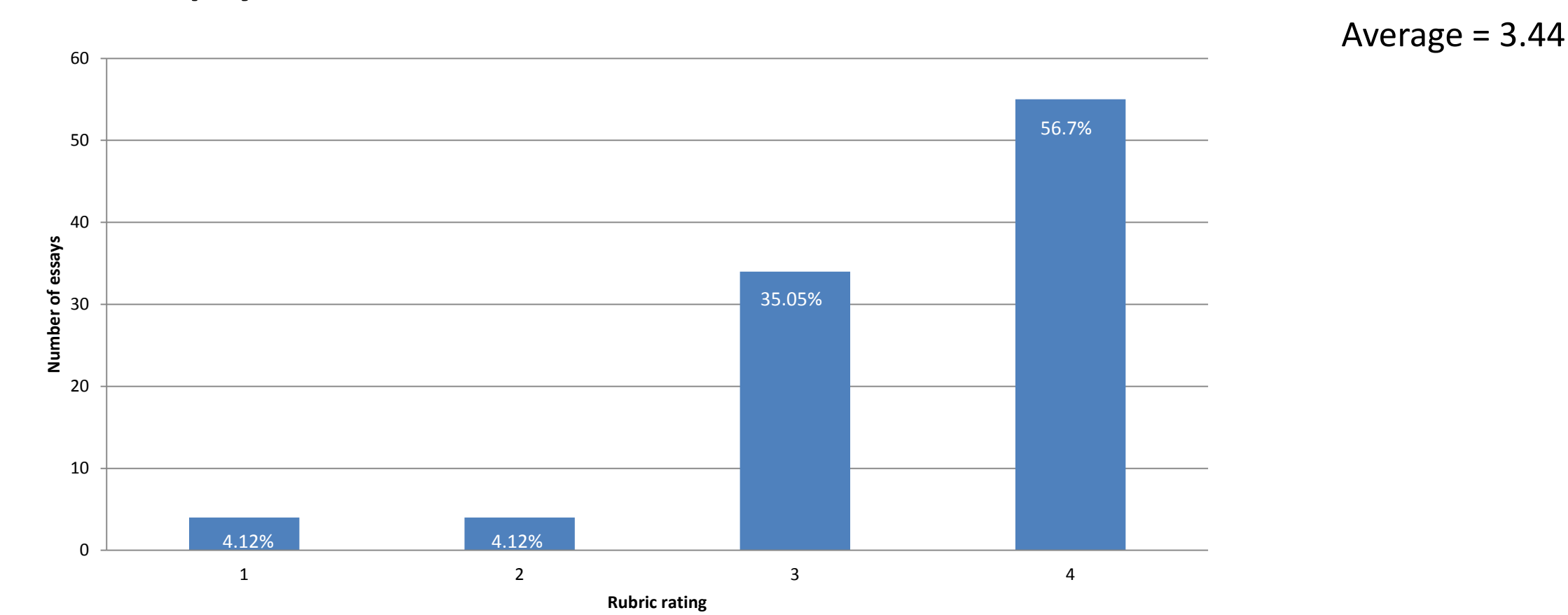
As co-curricular units charged with supporting student academic success, we wanted to design a unit that would increase students’ confidence and sense of belonging as well as cultivate certain habits of mind, like being curious, engaged and seeking expertise.

Process and Methods:



Analysis:

Outcome 1: Students will visit the DePaul University Libraries & gain familiarity with the physical attributes of the libraries.

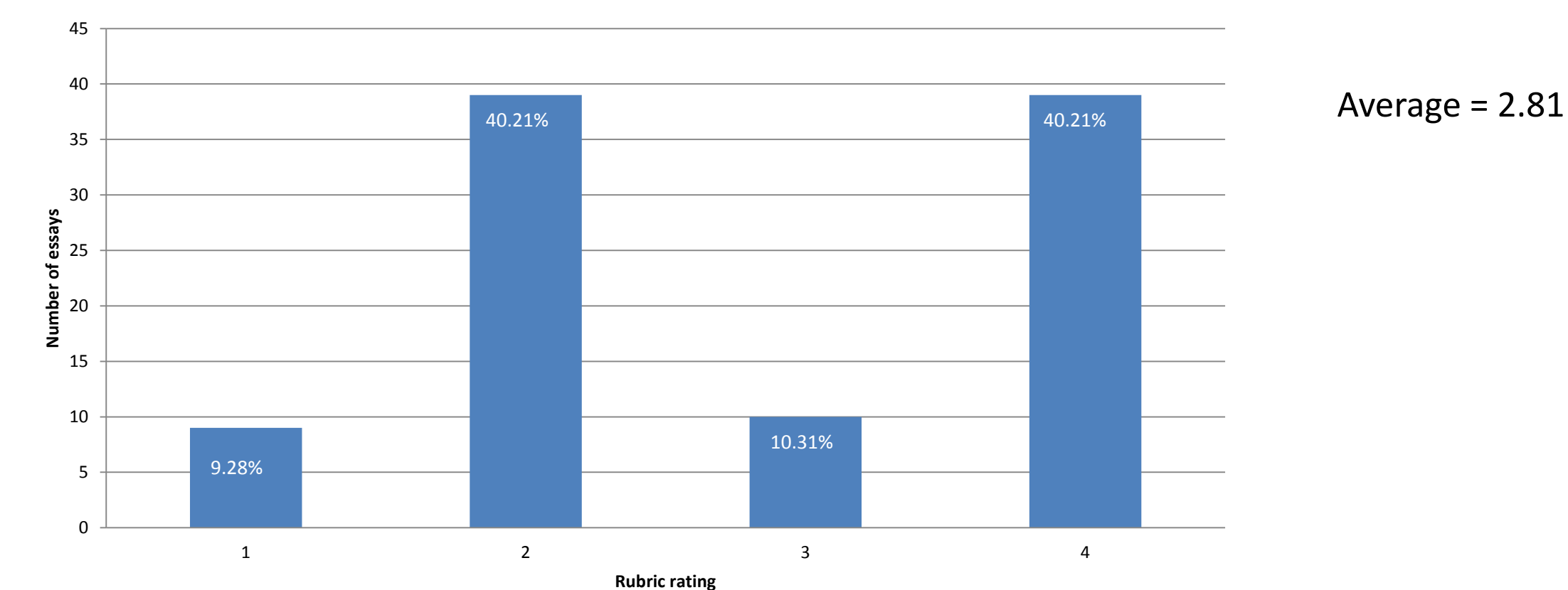


Most students (n=89 or 91.75%) at least demonstrated basic evidence of visiting. 34 students provided basic evidence, & 55 noted additional resources and services, such as study spaces, research help desk, tutoring space, librarians & group work areas.

53 essays talked about interacting with library staff, referring to librarians and library staff, noting that staff was “friendly,” “helpful,” “kind” and “caring.”

29 essays remarked on the quiet. Students also noted our instant messaging service, mobile app, and wayfinding touchscreen at the entrance to the library.

Outcome 3: Students will identify and articulate novel features of the academic library relative to their prior experience with libraries (e.g., library’s physical layout and services).



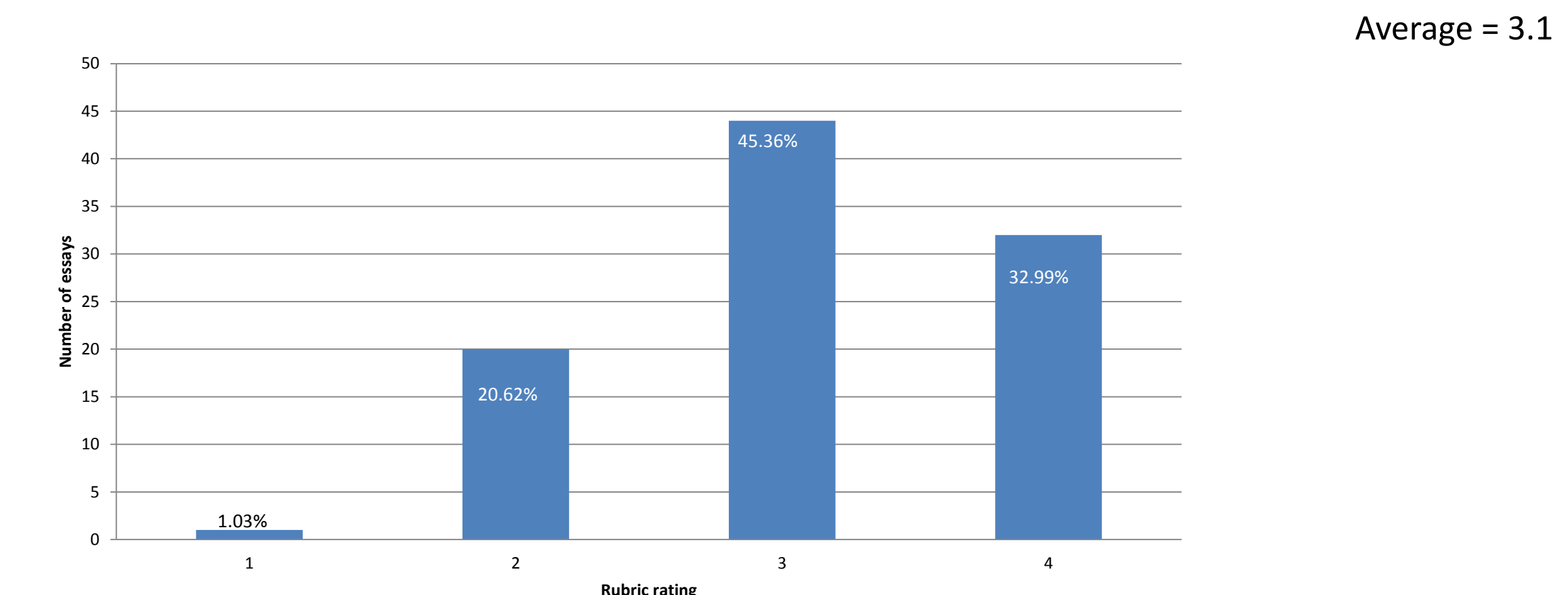
Most students were not able to articulate in what ways academic libraries were different than libraries they had previously encountered, but many of them expressed other ways in which our library was different than libraries they used before. In other words, even though most students didn’t articulate what made an academic library different than a public library, they did articulate what was different or new to them about their experience in our library.

78 (80.41%) students indicated that they had prior experience with a library, typically mentioning a school or public library. At least 23 students noted the size of our library relative to other libraries they have experienced.

“This library was so much bigger and it really wasn’t sectioned in like teen books, science, but instead they were all scattered all over. The fact that I had to independently find the book and check it out on my own was completely new to me. I usually had my mom with me in the library I had back home.”

Among other discoveries, one student noted that information could be found in context: “I didn’t have any difficulty finding it, at first when I went to the library I was trying to just get an item so I can write this reflection however when I went to that section of the library not only did I find books related to Ethiopia but books written about places like Burkina Faso which is pretty rare.”

Outcome 2: Students will complete a successful search for material and check out at least one item.

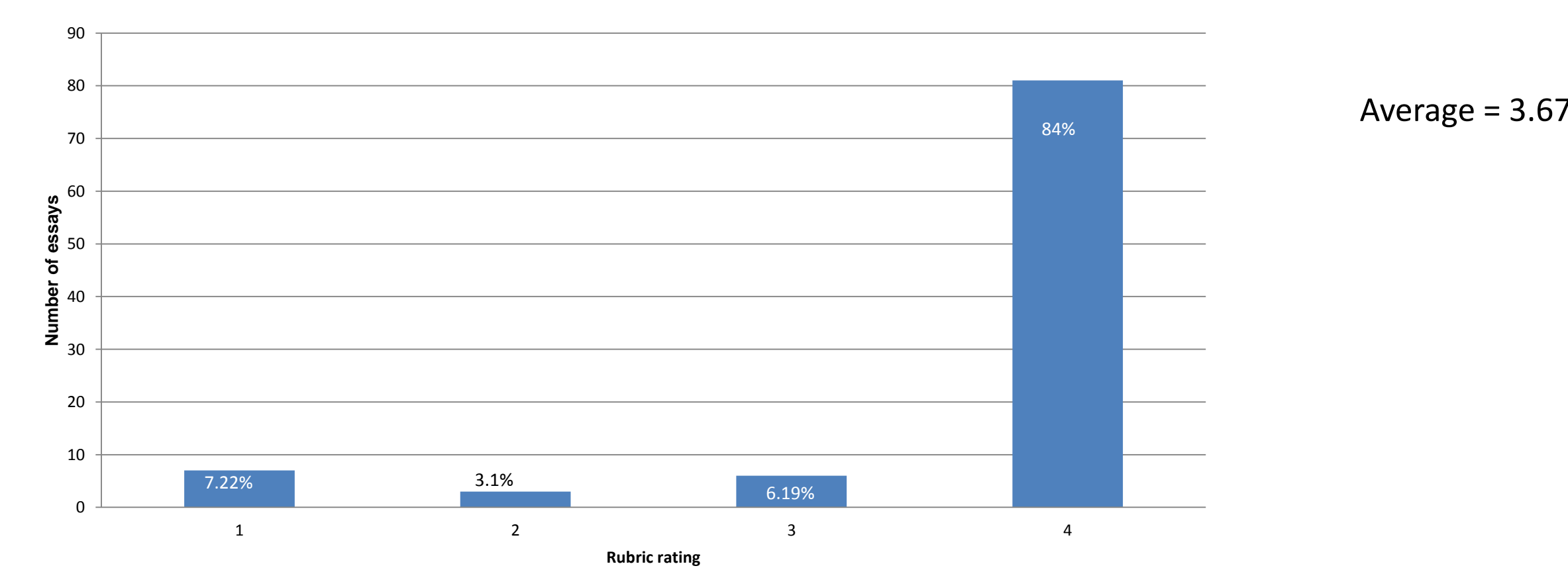


More students (n=64, 65.98%) demonstrated evidence of an initial struggle or some difficulty in using available library resources to find item than did not (n=32). A rating of 3 suggested to us that students were encountering something new and destabilizing, and therefore memorable: “I was ecstatic, through some hard work and learning from my mistakes I was able to find the book and realize how resourceful and organized the library actually is.” (95)

Students rating a 2 (n=20) did not demonstrate evidence of effectively using available library resources to find their items. In many cases, this group of students did not ask for assistance, note signage or use the library catalog (as directed by the assignment), and provided little evidence that they were aware of how a library might be organized, or that a system might exist to help them.

At least 40 essays indicated the experience easier than expected, and 19 noted it was more difficult than anticipated. Some students sought assistance immediately, while others sought assistance only after an initial setback. For some students it was their first experience finding a book in a library without the assistance of a librarian or parent.

Outcome 4: Students will articulate at least one way the library can support their success as university learner.



Since the assignment directed students to find an item, many students articulated that the library provides things (primarily books) which will support their academic success. Students also connected the presence of librarians and quiet study spaces to their success. For example: “Nowadays, most of the classes require a lot of research to be done. The library can be crucial for me as a learner because it offers variety of different sources from which I can get information to support the evidence in my essays or it can simply serve as a quiet place to study and read books for further development.” (41)

One also recognized that in addition to finding evidence to support your claims, information can help you develop new ideas: “I hope to learn more on the issue so I can develop my own opinions based on facts from this book.” (19)

“I truly believe that DePaul’s library is a great resource, and I know I will be trying to make the best use of it. I’ve heard stories about the music collection. And I’m sure that we all have more interests besides music. The library could be our opportunity for us to be proactive and research what ever interests us. After all, it is easier to learn when it is not for a grade, and you are not under pressure.” (3)

Another student said, “I feel as though having a library of this size will be very beneficial to my learning process here at DePaul University. Not only are there the physical books, but there are different databases, e-books, and much more that the libraries help us gain access too! Even if I don’t necessarily need to use the resources within the library, I feel it is a place I could always go if I need space from my roommates to study or just have a little alone time!” (19)

Note: Students were not told that anyone from the library would be reading their essays prior to their agreement to participate in this research.

Challenges:

Not all Chicago Quarter classes completed the assignment

Sample returned was limited

Rubric design & applying rubric

The reflection essay as “performance”

Claims & Contributions:

Independent learning activities, when coupled with reflection, are an effective intervention in providing an orientation to the library in particular and “academic life” in general.

Many students entered DePaul not knowing how to find material in an academic library, and after this activity, most students have a better understanding of how to get started.

Students are able to articulate multiple ways that the library contributes to their academic success.

Students reported an affective change towards library use, e.g. from anxiety to pride.

As we succeed in producing library “insiders,” we contribute to students sense of belonging, and their retention and success.

Conclusions & Recommendations:

Requiring a simple, self-directed library activity in the First Year Experience curriculum can help create insiders by situating students, particularly first-generation students, in the academic community, and it does not have to be done by librarians.

An opportunity to practice basic information literacy skills in a safe environment, with a low stakes assignment, should enable students to access information more easily and confidently the second time.

Reflection papers can be an effective way to invite students to connect their personal experiences to new academic experiences, and reinforce their identity as successful members of the academic community.

Reflection papers may help librarians gain insight into how students navigate discovery systems and physical spaces, and students’ affective relationship with libraries and research.

Getting students into the physical library can facilitate student retention and success, particularly among first-generation students.

Future Directions:

What can we learn from what students say? We are looking forward to using qualitative analysis in order to:

Build an empirical basis for understanding how first-year students may engage with ACRL threshold concepts in information literacy in their own words.

Explore how new college researchers situate their academic identities through narrative.

Understand how librarians can build on this experience as they deliver library instruction in subsequent quarters.