# The Community Study Assignment for Leisure Studies: Integrating Information Literacy, Leisure Theory, and Critical Thinking

*by Glenn Ellen Starr and Paul Gaskill*

*This paper examines the Appalachian State University Leisure Studies Program's Community Study Assignment—the major writing requirement for the "Introduction to Recreation and Leisure" course. The discussion focuses on the close collaboration between teaching faculty and reference librarians; the assignment's development of information literacy, leisure theory, and critical thinking skills; and ways in which these skills enhance students' future academic work and professional performance. It also highlights active learning in the library instruction session which prepares students for the assignment; additional ways planned to enhance the assignment; and other disciplines for which the assignment could be adapted.*

Over the past ten years, close collaboration between Appalachian State University's Library and Leisure Studies Program has led to a high level of integration of library research into the program's curriculum. As the program's enrollment has grown (there are now two hundred majors and six faculty), so has its inclusion of library-related assignments. In courses from the sophomore level through senior seminar,

*Glenn Ellen Starr is Associate Professor, Belk Library, and Paul Gaskill is Associate Professor, Department of Health, Leisure, and Exercise Science, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC 28608 <STARRGE@appstate.edu>.*

students find journal articles and write summaries of them; design grant proposals; write research papers; design a business plan for a commercial recreation enterprise; study the travel and tourism industry of a particular state; and learn about the benefits and pitfalls of Internet resources. Library instruction sessions prepare them for many of these assignments. The author (Starr) has collaborated with Leisure Studies faculty on journal articles and conference presentations. The Leisure Studies Association, a service club for majors, has supported the library's Adopt-A-Journal program by purchasing subscriptions to three journals for the past four years.

**The Community Study Assignment**

In Appalachian's Leisure Studies Program, "Introduction to Recreation and Leisure" is the course designed to familiarize students with the theoretical foundation of the leisure service industry, its various sectors, and the leisure service delivery system in the United States. The major writing assignment for the course—and the cornerstone of the library instruction program for Leisure Studies—is the community study, which asks students to research their home town. As Figure 1 illustrates, the assignment is interdisciplinary in nature, since students will collect data on history, geography/topography, government and political structure, economic forces, demographic makeup, and social/educational programs. The focus of the project is the leisure service delivery system, considered as one portion of a community's total resources and services.

The Community Study Assignment is also an effort to reduce the detached, disengaged student writing often seen in traditional research papers. The authors have experimented with techniques to encourage students to develop and use skills in both information literacy and critical thinking as they work in their leisure studies content area. This article will discuss how these skills have been introduced in the assignment and will outline the results of the work as well as further thoughts on improving the assignment. The authors hope, additionally, to demonstrate how course instructors and reference librarians can work together effectively to produce students who not only know leisure studies content more fully but who are prepared to apply information literacy and critical thinking skills to their work in other courses and in later employment and interview situations.

**Developing Information Literacy Skills**

Early in the semester, each section of "Introduction to Recreation and Leisure" meets in the library for one class period in preparation for the Community Study Assignment. Students are given a detailed bibliography which is arranged by type of source and by the categories on the assignment outline. One strength of the assignment is the wide variety of information sources and bibliographic research techniques which students are invited to use in its completion. For example, the *Mobil*

*Travel Guide* and *AAA Tour Book* help them determine the major recreation and tourism sites, festivals, and events of the community. The Work Projects Administration Federal Writers' Project Guide for each state provides historical information and recommended "tours" of major areas. Since North Carolina's WPA Guide was published in 1939, students are cautioned that the "tours" may be incomplete or inaccurate. A variety of facts and statistics can be found in books on the best places to live, such as *America's Top-Rated Cities* or *America's Top-Rated Smaller Cities*. The *Soil Survey* for the county, the state atlas, and a textbook on North Carolina's geography and environment give the required geological and geographical information. Students learn to use a 21-year index to *The State Magazine* (North Carolina's popular, accessible periodical covering travel and tourism, local history, and culture) for gathering colorful details on recreation sites in or near their community.

Statistics on population, employment, education, cost of living, disposable income, and much more can be gleaned from a variety of commercially-published and government sources, such as the annual *County and City Extra, Demographics USA* (from the publisher of the journal *Sales & Marketing Management*), and *County Business Patterns*. Students learn the value of state government publications by using the annual "North Carolina Community Profile" (published by the state Department of Commerce) for their home town and (if the town is located in a mountain county) Western Carolina University's annual *County Development Information*.

Students also use Internet resources, such as Web pages for the cities or towns being studied and for parks, museums, or other recreation sites. North Carolina State University's "Recreation Resources Service" (http://www2.ncsu.edu/ncsu/forest_resources/rrs.html) provides data such as adult athletic program fees and median per capita expenditures by park and recreation agencies, and a plethora of links to other useful sites. They are cautioned to assess whether information found on the Internet is current, complete, and accurate. Some of the information required by the assignment can best be obtained outside the library—particularly the details on the community's parks and recreation department. Students learn to use the library's collection of directories for help in contacting and/or visiting public libraries, chambers of commerce, and state or county agencies. Other directories (for museums, camps, parks, and campgrounds) give them additional data for their inventory of recreation opportunities in or near their community.

Most of the sources are learned as students complete the assignment, rather than during the library instruction session. The session employs an active learning technique, inspired by Eugene Engeldinger's concept of "the thirty-minute stand,"[1] which gives students a chance to learn about one source in some detail, work in groups, and teach each other about six other sources. At the start of the session, the librarian offers practical

advice on using library materials for the assignment. Students then receive a worksheet listing the titles and locations of seven important sources from the lengthy bibliography. The librarian gives a "mini-booktalk" of 3–5 minutes on one of the sources, covering these questions: (1) Where and how do you locate the source in the library? (2) Generally, what kinds of information does it contain? What is its purpose? (3) How do you locate the information on your community in this source? (4) With what parts of the Community Study Assignment do you think this source will help? Students are then divided into seven groups. They receive a very brief tour of the library which points out where they will find the sources on their worksheet. Each group has a coordinator (to keep them on task) and a spokesperson (to deliver the group's report). The groups spend 15–20 minutes examining their source and preparing their mini-booktalk. The librarian and the instructor help them as needed and remind them to work quickly to cover the four questions. Students then return to the library classroom and give their mini-booktalks. They bring the source to the classroom and show it as they talk. They are urged to take notes on what they learn from the other groups. The mini-booktalks provide an active, hands-on model for the process students should follow in using the bibliography and gleaning pertinent information for their assignment from the sources.

The information literacy skills students learn through the Community Study Assignment are reinforced throughout the leisure studies degree program and into their professional career. Writing assignments using some of these skills are given in administration, recreation program planning, outdoor recreation management, senior seminar, commercial recreation, and travel and tourism courses. Thus students receive the essential practice and repetition that builds mastery. When preparing for job interviews, students are encouraged to investigate thoroughly the region, community, and agency to which they have applied. The result is a highly informed applicant who has excellent insight into the agency and its demographic, political, and social environment. Well-informed applicants ask well-informed questions of future employers, and the fact that they have thoroughly investigated the community verifies their interest in the position. Students may eventually, as Gaskill and Starr have demonstrated, use these same library materials and skills on the job as park and recreation administrators for budget justification, program planning, and grantwriting.[2]

## The Need for Critical Thinking Skills

Teaching critical thinking skills has been espoused for some of the same reasons as the teaching of information literacy. Chet Meyers noted, in 1986, that:

> the amount of information available through computers and the media seems to have outstripped people's abilities to process and use that information. In such a context, colleges and universities need

> no longer serve as repositories of knowledge, and teachers are no longer essential as lecturers and information givers. It is also increasingly important that students master the thinking and reasoning skills they will need to process the information at hand.[3]

S. D. Brookfield defines critical thinking as:

> ... the process of figuring out what to believe or do about a situation, phenomenon, problem or controversy for which no single definitive answer or solution exists. The term implies a diligent, open-minded search for understanding, rather than for discovery of a necessary conclusion. The issue explored may be academic, practical, esthetic, or ethical. Critical thinking is usually associated with education, but it is essential to rational living in the workplace, in politics, and in personal relationships.[4]

In keeping with these principles, the Community Study Assignment prepares students to see that not all situations in academic life or in work after graduation will be solved by simple, mechanical processes. Many will require an open-ended strategy of information gathering and independent processing and formulation.

## Critical Thinking Aspects of the Assignment

Chet Meyers discusses several characteristics of written assignments which encourage the development of critical thinking skills. One of these, which is particularly well employed in the Community Study Assignment, is "relat[ing] to real problems and issues and draw[ing] upon students' own experiences."[5] Similarly, Browne and Keeley-Vasudeva advocate creating "practice opportunities" through cases or exercises to stimulate "personal involvement [which] provokes students into discussion and involvement."[6] In the Community Study Assignment, students are encouraged to write about their home town—allowing them to revisit a familiar area and take pride in the skills and insight they have acquired through two years of college coursework. A comment students frequently make in the "Recommendations" and "Conclusions" sections of the assignment is that they discovered leisure programs, agencies, and opportunities of which they were unaware, even after having grown up in the community and participated heavily in its leisure offerings. This realization alone is a powerful one, often compelling undeclared majors, who now understand the components of the leisure industry, to pursue a degree in recreation management. Students already committed to leisure studies come to appreciate their newfound profession. They see that they can improve leisure in their community for their friends, neighbors, and relatives. The assignment also evokes strong memories of leisure participation during childhood, often with family members. Reminiscences (both positive and negative) are shared during students' oral reports—returning to the field where they played Little League ball at age eight, or feeling humiliation over their father's obvi-

ous disappointment at their poor sports performance. Students note that they have boated on a lake dozens of times but have just discovered who is responsible for its management. Frequently hiked trails or greenways take on new significance when students learn who is responsible for their development and maintenance.

Chet Meyers also asserts that critical thinking is more likely to develop when course instructors refrain from teaching abstractions out of context. It is ineffective, he notes, to present students with crystallized thoughts and expect them to be able to do what scholars do.[7] Browne and Keeley-Vasudeva echo these concerns: "The sponge model of teaching and learning results in students seeing the cut flowers of refined thought. They are not permitted to view the growing and pruning process that critical thinking represents."[8] When we present abstractions first, we rob students of the pleasure of discovery. We set students up for *disembedded learning* by the "teaching of abstractions in an artificial context, devoid of any association with the world as students know it."[9] Students must themselves learn to "disembed," or dig out the general from the specific. To develop this skill, course instructors should "create a problem-solving atmosphere that engages students' interest and provides motivation to discover the process of abstract thinking."[10]

Rather than simply giving students academic examples of how leisure services are hypothetically organized in communities, the authors let them discover the patterns for themselves through the Community Study Assignment. For instance, by analyzing the demographics of a town or region, students can draw correlations between its demographic patterns and the leisure services available to the various population sectors. If, for example, students discover that the town has a large or growing number of minorities or senior citizens, this knowledge should prompt them to assess whether the recreational needs of these groups are being addressed adequately by the town's leisure service delivery system. Or, students might see that geographical or topographical features such as flood plains or river corridors, where construction has been restricted, have affected the amount of outdoor recreation and green spaces. Allowing students to *disembed* these correlations for themselves has proved much more effective than simply presenting to them in a lecture, or discussing with them from their textbooks, the idea that a thorough study of a community might unveil demographic or geographic features that affect, or need to be considered in, the leisure service delivery system.

Critical thinking is also enhanced, according to Meyers, by helping students develop analytical frameworks for the discipline. Thinking critically does not, says Meyers, develop naturally as students absorb more and more complex discipline content. People are naturally inquisitive, but:

> there is nothing natural about learning a framework

for analyzing a modern novel or management system. Analytical frameworks must be taught explicitly and constructed consciously, beginning with simple operations and building toward complexity and subtlety. Initially, for most students, this means learning to recognize key concepts, terms, issues, and methodologies—not by memorizing them but by working with them in the context of real problems and concerns and by relating them to experiences and previous learning."[11]

The Community Study Assignment helps students develop an analytical framework for leisure studies. Textbook readings and class discussions throughout the course provide both concepts and content which students can synthesize with the data they collect on their community to form their recommendations and conclusions in the assignment. Students frequently recommend enlarging or adding a program or leisure opportunity to their community, usually based on the region's demographic characteristics. Another common recommendation involves the marketing done by leisure service agencies in the community. Low-cost modifications in an agency's marketing strategy might enhance its ability to create or meet public demand for services. Students also tend to suggest increases in the amount of land, facilities, and resources administered by recreation agencies. Comparing the community's trail miles, acres of parks, or number of ballfields and tennis courts to national standards or to the community's population helps students judge the adequacy of these recreation areas. All these recommendations are based on sound thinking and research, because the assignment, if completed thoughtfully, has developed an analytical framework for arriving at them.

To think critically, students must acquire the *procedural knowledge* of the discipline—knowledge which Joanne Kurfiss describes as "tacit, difficult to articulate, and even more difficult for students to discover on their own."[12] Procedural knowledge encompasses analytical frameworks. It is "how people do things in the discipline," including how to ask questions, find answers to questions, evaluate others' research, and present an argument in writing. Kurfiss asserts that these skills are seldom taught deliberately and, once introduced, "must be rehearsed, with feedback, to become part of the students' knowledge base."[13] One way in which the Community Study Assignment helps students learn "how to do things in the discipline" is through its basic structure, the needs assessment. Leisure studies majors are likely to produce this type of document later, on the job. Procedural knowledge is also developed by instructors' encouraging students to examine professional documents produced in their community—obtained from leisure service agencies or public libraries—which describe the current structure and future needs for leisure opportunities in the community. The recreation department's master plan is a document students often encounter while working on the assignment. They also see newsletters, press re-

leases, program evaluations, and grant applications.

Written assignments which include clear, unambiguous instructions—leaving little room for misinterpretation—are noted by Meyers as aids to critical thinking.[14] The Community Study Assignment's outline format, and its notes on what information to gather about each component of the recreation industry, provide much guidance for students. Further assistance comes from the library session and bibliography, which reduce wasted time and energy in gathering information.

**Future Enhancements to the Assignment**

The authors' investigation of the characteristics of assignments and classroom instruction which promote critical thinking generated several ideas for improvements to the Community Study Assignment. The following changes will be implemented in future semesters. Their effects will be gauged by students' evaluations of the assignment and their performance on it.

- *Give students more guidance in writing the "Recommendations" and "Conclusions" sections,* primarily in the form of questions they must answer. Two of the questions will concern the quality of the information they found:

(1) Did any of the information you used seem inaccurate or unreliable? For instance, did you feel any data was not current enough, or not close enough to the geographic level of your community (for instance, was it at the county or MSA level, rather than town)? Was it not close enough to your specific need (for instance, data on people who hike in general but not on where they hike)? Keeley and Browne have developed a set of critical-thinking questions to use in structuring assignments; one of these is "How good is the evidence?"[15]

(2) What information did you wish you had been able to find, and why? This question resembles Keeley and Browne's question: "What significant information is missing?"[16] It will also assist in refining or expanding the bibliography and in improving the library collection for support of the assignment.

- *Reinforce in students the importance of looking beyond their current opinion* and interacting with the information they gather. The course instructor will ask students, before they begin research for the assignment, to write a paragraph describing their current assessment of their home town's recreation needs. After completing the assignment, they will write another paragraph on how the community study reaffirmed and/or changed that initial assessment. Browne and Keeley-Vasudeva observe that "in the absence of explicit encouragement to consider conflicting

perspectives, learners fasten on evidence and arguments that confirm their current opinions. They, in essence, engage in reverse logic. Their conclusions are given; reasons are sought later. . . ."[17] Similarly, reference librarians often are told by students, "I know what I'm going to say in this paper; I just need some outside sources to back it up," or "I've already written the paper—but I'm required to find some library sources to list."

- *Have students give their oral reports on the assignment while it is still in draft stage.* The course instructor will encourage them to respond, in the final paper, to suggestions from both instructor and students that emerge in the discussion following their oral presentations. One "classroom context" suggested by Nelson and Hayes for getting high investment from students when they are writing from sources is providing intermediate feedback on the work-in-progress.[18] The author's (Gaskill) students have been receiving feedback on their presentations—but not at a time when it could improve their work. In addition, being required to address the feedback in revisions would help them learn to consider and value the feedback.

- *Require students to submit a copy of the final report to the recreation agency employee they interviewed.* This gesture has been informally suggested to students in past semesters. The report may not offer the agency much in the way of new information or ideas, particularly if it deals with a large community in which frequent needs assessments and grant proposals are done. Still, the provision of an additional audience besides the teacher, as Nelson and Hayes note, may help move students from low-investment to high-investment writing and information-gathering strategies.[19] Meyers also comments that giving students a rhetorical situation (including a particular audience) in an assignment provokes them to think about the problem and its solution, rather than what the teacher wants to see.[20] This requirement can also be used to remind students of the networking benefits of the assignment. One graduate of Appalachian's Leisure Studies Program was ultimately hired by a recreation manager he had interviewed while gathering information for the Community Study Assignment.

## CONCLUSION

The Community Study Assignment could easily be adapted to courses in other disciplines. Social work students could study the broad range of social services in a community. Psychology or counseling students could survey mental health services. Geography students could look at planning and land use agencies. Students taking courses abroad could investigate the city or region before they go. Business students might examine the comprehensive economic climate of a city or region.

The assignment also has direct applicability to public administration and political science majors, allowing for the investigation of city management as well as political processes. History and anthropology students could better understand the origins of communities by investigating their current structure. Library science students may become more familiar with local, regional, or national libraries and other information providers by using this type of assignment as a vehicle.

The assignment's primary strength, however, is that it develops multiple skills. This strength will be especially useful to leisure studies and other programs in universities and colleges which are revisiting their "general college" or "core" curricula. In the process, academic disciplines are asked to identify courses which contribute to the broader goals of developing students' writing, speaking, multicultural, computer, or mathematical competencies and awareness. Since students give a speech on the results of their Community Study Assignments to the class using a presentation outline, the "Introduction to Recreation and Leisure" course qualifies at Appalachian for both oral/speaking and writing designations.

The Community Study is precisely the type of assignment that aids instruction librarians in promoting information literacy and library instruction services. Librarians may hesitate to take a broader role in the curriculum by offering assignments such as this to teaching faculty who are not using the library, or by helping them design or revamp their existing assignments. We may not believe we have much to offer in these areas—other than ensuring that assignments can be completed using the library's access tools and collection. Eugene Engeldinger has argued that librarians need a philosophy which we can articulate in promoting our instructional services. We can solve some of our frustration when offering instruction by "anticipating the difficulties and objections [to library assignments and library instruction] raised by faculty and others and by addressing them in our philosophies."[21] We are familiar with faculty objections to library-use assignments such as research papers: the grading time, the necessity to check for plagiarism, poor results from students (especially when students regurgitate, rather than engaging the material), and student boredom with and resistance to such assignments. Incorporating critical thinking skills into the assignment, as the Community Study does, can preclude some of these objections. Getting students personally involved and having them deal with real problems and issues should counter boredom and encourage involvement with the information being gathered. Another advantage is that the Community Study is a rather brief writing assignment (only eight pages). Chet Meyers has noted that short papers can be more effective than term papers in developing critical thinking skills because, particularly if several of them are assigned as a series of "building blocks," students can learn and practice simple skills—such as recognizing the main issues, summa-

rizing, and asking suitable questions—and get prompt feedback on their work. Then they are better prepared to move on to more complex components of critical thinking, such as analyzing arguments and spotting assumptions.[22]

Many other writing assignments exist—devised by librarians, teaching faculty, critical thinking scholars, and librarians collaborating with teaching faculty—which develop information literacy and improve on the research paper in various ways.[23] By being aware of such assignments which develop multiple competencies, and by understanding some basic characteristics which promote critical thinking (such as those articulated by Chet Meyers and Stuart Keeley), librarians can add additional arguments and resources to our philosophy of instruction.

**References**


[1]Eugene A. Engeldinger, "Teaching Only the Essentials—The Thirty-Minute Stand," *Reference Services Review* 16 no. 4 (1988): 47–50, 96.

[2]Paul L. Gaskill and Glenn Ellen Starr, "Using Library Research to Support Budget Preparation and Financial Decision Making in Recreation and Park Departments," *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration* 10 no. 3 (Fall 1992): 17–31.

[3]Chet Meyers, *Teaching Students to Think Critically: A Guide for Faculty in All Disciplines* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1986), p. 1.

[4]Stephen D. Brookfield, *Developing Critical Thinkers: Challenging Adults to Explore Alternative Ways of Thinking and Acting* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1987), cited in: Joanne Gainen Kurfiss, "Helping Faculty Foster Students' Critical Thinking in the Disciplines," *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* 37 (Spring 1989), p. 42.

[5]Meyers, p. 73.

[6]M. Neil Browne and Mary L. Keeley-Vasudeva, "Classroom Controversy as an Antidote for the Sponge Model of Learning," *College Student Journal* 26 no. 3 (September 1, 1992), p. 369.

[7]Meyers, p. 30.

[8]Browne, p. 372.

[9]Meyers, p. 30.

[10]Meyers, p. 30.

[11]Meyers, p. 10.

[12]Joanne Kurfiss, "Helping Faculty Foster Students' Critical Thinking in the Disciplines," *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* 37 (Spring 1989), p. 44.

[13]Kurfiss, p. 46.

[14]Meyers, p. 73.

[15]Stuart Keeley and M. Neil Browne, "Assignments that Encourage Critical Thinking," *Journal of Professional Studies* 12 (Winter 1988), p. 8.

[16]Keeley, p. 9.

[17]Browne, p. 370.

[18]Jennie Nelson and John R. Hayes, "How the Writing Context Shapes College Students' Strategies for Writing from Sources" (Center for the Study of Writing) (ERIC ED 297 374), August 1988, p. 19.

[19]Nelson, p. 20.

[20]Meyers, pp. 83–84.

[21]Eugene A. Engeldinger, "Frustration Management in a Course-Integrated Bibliographic Instruction Program," *RQ* 31 no. 1 (Fall 1992), p. 23.

[22]Meyers, pp. 70–73, 76.

[23]Stuart Keeley and M. Neil Browne list some useful principles for designing such assignments in their article, "Assignments that Encourage Critical Thinking" (cited above). The author (Starr) is compiling an annotated bibliography (which now includes over seventy items) of such assignments as described in books, ERIC documents, library science journals, and the teaching journals of various disciplines.

## APPENDIX
## Community Study Assignment

**50 points** Community Study Assignment
**Length:** 8 pages
**Purpose:** The purpose of this assignment is to get you to analyze and recognize the recreation/leisure opportunities and facilities that exist in your home town or area.
**Execution:** The following is a suggested outline of elements which should be included in your community study report:

**I. Introduction**
- A. Brief history of area
- B. Geography
- C. Governmental structure
- D. Taxes/bonds for recreation
- E. Demographics

**II. Body**
- A. Public recreation opportunities
- B. Commercial recreation opportunities
- C. Private/non-profit recreation opportunities
- D. Recreation opportunities at schools/athletic programs
- E. Recreation opportunities for the disabled
- F. Recreation opportunities for senior citizens
- G. Outdoor recreation opportunities

**III. Recommendations: Proposed recreation programs and facilities**

**IV. Summary and Conclusions**

Note: Items to explore under each heading in Section II include:
- Administrative organization
- Number of employees and education required
- Revenue sources (i.e., general fund, special tax, fees/charges, special events, donations, gifts)
- Types and variety of recreation programs
- Budget
- Long-range plans
- Cost to enroll in various programs as a participant
- Public or private surveys that have been done, and their results
- Future projects or programs that are planned

**Research methods:** Personal interviews, studying brochures, annual reports, master plans, library research, Internet resources, and any other forms of primary or secondary information.