Details on our rationale for focusing on at-risk students:

At-risk student populations can vary from institution to institution and there have been very few studies that tie information literacy development directly to the diversity of student demographics that can identify if we are effective at meeting the needs of populations that require the most help. We face changing demographics of incoming college students with very little research on how to address the widening college readiness gap. There are a number of studies that discuss the difference between the information literacy skills students develop in high school and the expectations they face when arriving at college. However, aside from outlining the issues to increase awareness, there is a surprising lack of clear and concrete solutions that prove to make a significant difference. It falls on college librarians to address these issues. Furthermore, as outlined in AAC&U’s 2015 publication, *America's Unmet Promise: The Imperative for Equity in Higher Education*, it is critical to examine this issue tied to many aspects of diversity and how differences in background, race, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomics, etc. affect a student’s ability to succeed in college. We must address the problem of at-risk students’ ability to effectively navigate the information available to them to approach a greater understanding of the world and their particular situations within it, which presents a significant gap in their college readiness skills. This has not yet been deeply studied by colleges because getting access to demographic information and conducting a comprehensive study that increases our understanding of these related factors can be a challenge for most institutions. This grant will allow us to develop best practices to traverse various situations at different institutions to gain access to student demographic details to compare against findings that lead to new insights for identifying and supporting at-risk students.

The question of which students are at-risk is worth investigation because there are a wide variety of opinions on the topic. One perspective by Buffy Smith, in *Mentoring At-Risk Students through the Hidden Curriculum of Higher Education*, focuses on students who are at a disadvantage because they lack what the author refers to as “cultural capital” to navigate a “hidden curriculum.” Smith writes: “Students labeled ‘at-risk’ are typically considered by some scholars to have two or more of the following characteristics: raised in a single family household, low-income, first-generation, demonstrate poor academic performance…Other scholars argue that students are placed ‘at-risk’ because of institutional cultural barriers embedded within the higher education system.” She emphasizes that the label of “at-risk” for her purposes means that these students “have the potential to succeed or fail depending on the types of institutional support they receive” (p3). She then goes on to define the hidden curriculum as “the manifestation of the biased institutionalized cultural capital of higher education” (p59). It is in essence a second, non-academic “curriculum” that doesn’t need to be taught to students who grow up in a particular (privileged) environment, but that does need to be explicitly taught for many people who come from different (usually less
privileged) backgrounds. Smith concludes that mentoring can help these at-risk students become academically successful.

It seems possible that a new Framework learning model focused on reflection, discourse and practice could provide new ways to address these issues and allow students to bridge the gap more effectively than was allowed within the highly structured Standards. Perhaps the Standards approach reinforced at-risk students’ difficulty with navigating the “hidden curriculum” by presenting them with yet another system within higher education that increased their sense of inadequacy. Recent research by the Jed Foundation (JED) and the Steve Fund provides insights into how some demographic categories of students feel less prepared and are less likely to seek assistance. Their reported findings include:

- “Caucasian students are more likely than African American and Hispanic students to say they feel more academically prepared than their peers during their first term of college (50% vs. 36% and 39%).”
- “African American and Hispanic students are more likely than Caucasian students to say that it seems like everyone has college figured out but them (52% and 49% vs. 41%).”
- “African American students are more likely than Caucasian students to say they tend to keep their feelings about the difficulty of college to themselves (75% vs. 61%).”

The gap in information literacy skills based on the Standards for specific demographic categories compelled Jessame Ferguson to explore this project with other partners. In August 2012 McDaniel College tested all incoming freshman during orientation prior to any exposure to the library using Project SAILS, a nationally recognized Information Literacy skills assessment based on the Standards. Test results for 330 students were analyzed using demographic data pulled from the student record system. Below are the statistically significant findings related to demographics:

- Males (164) didn’t do as well as females (166) in 3 skills areas:
  - Developing a research strategy
  - Evaluating sources
  - Retrieving sources
- Minorities (101) didn’t do as well as non-minorities (229) in 4 skills areas:
  - Searching
  - Selecting finding tools
  - Documenting sources
  - Retrieving sources
- Black students (47) didn’t do as well as non-black students (283) in 5 skills areas:
  - Searching
  - Selecting finding tools
  - Understanding economic, legal and social issues of information
  - Documenting sources
  - Retrieving sources

It was immediately clear that these findings related to the conversation institutionally about how difficult it was to retain both male and minority students and deserved further exploration.
beyond just one institution’s findings. One big question that needs scrutiny is how much the instrument itself, as a standardized test using Standards based academic constructs, is at fault for some of these lower scores. The hope is that a new model of assessment based on the Framework might reveal new pathways to increase at-risk student success. As a profession we are in the nascent stage for developing a new approach that might solve some previously insurmountable issues. Some research is attempting to make connections between the Framework and developmental courses aimed at helping students bridge the college readiness gap, such as Larissa Garcia’s article “Applying the Framework for Information Literacy to the Developmental Education Classroom.” If more research focuses on this need, it may yield promising results.

This project is an attempt to address the hidden information inequalities that at-risk students bring with them upon entering college. Preliminary investigations have indeed suggested that there are students who are far less sophisticated than others in their understanding of the world of information. We believe this may be especially true when we look deeper at their dispositions and knowledge practices as laid out in the new Framework. The research in Smith’s book shows that at-risk students benefit from the extra help of mentoring. This project will help determine if there are indeed differences in the information literacy knowledge levels of students identified as at-risk and if the support offered through the library is useful to particular groups of at-risk students more so than others.

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1 There is no shortage of evidence for this trend, here is one recent source: “The percentage of American college students who are Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, Black, and American Indian/Alaska Native has been increasing. From 1976 to 2012, the percentage of Hispanic students rose from 4 percent to 15 percent, the percentage of Asian/Pacific Islander students rose from 2 percent to 6 percent, the percentage of Black students rose from 10 percent to 15 percent, and the percentage of American Indian/Alaska Native students rose from 0.7 to 0.9 percent. During the same period, the percentage of White students fell from 84 percent to 60 percent.” U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Fast Facts, (Washington, DC, 2015), http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=98 (accessed January 30, 2016).

2 Project Information Literacy conducted a comprehensive research study on this topic which finds similar conclusions as those noted in countless other studies: that students primarily use Google-like searches in high school and find it difficult to bridge their gaps in understanding when presented with faculty expectations written in college course assignments. Alison J. Head, "Learning the Ropes: How Freshmen Conduct Course Research Once They Enter College," Project Information Literacy (2013): 1-48, http://projectinfolit.org/images/pdfs/pil_2013_freshmenstudy_fullreport.pdf.

3 As outlined in Varlejs, Jana and Kwon’s recent study it seems there is very little that school librarians can do to affect a change in these trends. “The key insight gained from this study is that school librarians are relatively powerless to effect change from within or on their own.” (p.20) The study goes on to conclude a great deal of support needs to be secured in order to see a different outcome. Jana Varlejs, Eileen Stec, and Hannah Kwon, “Factors Affecting Students’ Information Literacy as They Transition from High School to College,” School Library Research 17 (2014): 1-23, http://www.ala.org/aasl/sites/ala.org.aasl/files/content/aaslpubsandjournals/slr/vol17/SLR_FactorsAffecting_V17.pdf.