The semester information support assignment began in early September with a discussion with several colleagues at work. This is my first venture back to teaching after staying home and raising our children for over ten years, and I was hired in our local district (a small school with approximately 335 students PK-12) to fill 1.5 retired positions: that of the outgoing K-12 library media specialist, and that of the outgoing middle school English teacher. Having taught at a larger school district for seven years with a specialty in middle school language arts, I was ecstatic to be offered the position to teach 3 eighth grade language arts classes in Potosi....and (to be quite honest with you) a bit intrepid, but grateful, to take on the district’s librarian position. Having no prior experience in the library, here I am entered in the University of Wisconsin System School Library Education Consortium, working full-time and taking graduate coursework to obtain my library media specialist initial license. It is the most terrifying, difficult, and yet fascinating job (outside of motherhood!) that I have ever experienced.

Back to the semester client project...I began the whole process of identifying a client by talking with teachers and administrators in my school, asking if anyone knew of anybody who might have a large information need. Since I am brand-new to the library, the district hired a mentor (a retired teacher-librarian) to work with the new high school English teacher and me. It was my mentor who approached me with the idea for compiling resources for our parents and teachers to use with the children in extending the district’s character education initiative. My mentor happens to be one of the founding members of the Potosi Schools Character Education Committee, so it worked out very well to work with her and the committee to meet their information need.

I started the whole process by considering the Information Cycle. What formal work had been done in the field of character education? Why did our district get involved in this initiative in the first place? What was working for them, and what was
not working? After getting initial training with a nationally recognized school in character education (Jefferson Public), several teachers came back to Potosi, engaged a few interested parents, and formed the Potosi Character Education Committee. The committee has changed membership since its inception in 2009, but overall it has remained a strong, positive influence in our school and community. One of the largest construction companies in the area (with its two owners alumni of our high school) funds the production of calendar magnets, pencils, brochures, posters, and even two billboards promoting the character traits that the committee wishes to promote and impress upon our school/community culture. It has been a very successful initiative in most respects, culminating last year with the raising of over $13,000 for the construction of two houses in Haiti for the disadvantaged people who live there and have been, not coincidentally, been ministered to by one of our finest teachers on mission trips to that area. This teacher went with his church group to help Haitians with their medical needs in September 2011, all the while blogging with his students back home in Potosi. The following year our entire school held several fundraisers such as pie sales and hat days, with all proceeds going toward the building of homes in Haiti for the families who became connected to our community. I witnessed the culmination of this project last spring as a long-term substitute teacher in our district, and you could feel the pride and compassion among our students and staff at the community pep rally to mark the event. I looked back at the correspondence, publicity, and photographs marking the event, and I knew that this group (the character education committee) was well worth my time and help. I am honored to become a part of the committee’s mission to “develop strong character based on traits that help people live and work together”.

I met informally with members of the Potosi Character Education Committee to get a look at their mission, the character traits they were performing, and their goals for this whole project. The character traits that we (and I say we, because I am a parent and teacher raising my children and working in this district) are trying to promote in our people are Respect (the focus in September), Responsibility (October), Citizenship (November), Caring (December), Self-Discipline (January), Fairness (February), Honesty (March), Courage (April), and Perseverance (May). The committee’s main
goal for me with this assignment was to collect resources (definitions, examples, ideas, and activities) that parents--and even teachers--could use with their children in our district, children of all ages. I decided to create my libguide with one page per character trait, to keep it simple and easy for parents to refer to, even showing their kids some of the resources (especially the videos and major talking points) to help prompt discussion among parent and child on these qualities.

After the class met at UW-Whitewater, I had more direction on the entire information collection process. I created a Refworks account and began searching databases and journals for the best, most relevant and recent research on the field of character education. I learned that key words like “character education” and “moral education” were great starting points on most search engines, and I began entering sources for my project in both Refworks and Delicious. I found myself gravitating more toward Delicious because I like writing brief summaries of sites and sources, tagging them with specific character traits and other key words such as “parent resource”, “teacher resource”, “elementary”, “middle” and “high school” (students). Some of my productive places to search were EBSCO, Badgerlink, and Google Blogger Search. The weekly assignments helped me add to my references, as I learned how to government documents, abstracts (such as the Statistical Abstract of the United States, which was great for showing relationships between family wages, family involvement, and character development in children), yearbooks, directories, blogs, and websites. I was pleasantly surprised at the amount of great literature that is available to help either directly or indirectly address character traits in children of all ages, and I was very intentional about including titles from all three age levels (elementary, middle, and secondary) in my book boxes on the libguide. I included books that parents are encouraged to look for anywhere (such as the public library, online, or at a bookstore) as well as books that can be found in our school library. There is nothing like a good story to prompt a deep look at yourself and at human nature, in general. A good story can do wonders in teaching and exemplifying respect, responsibility, self-discipline, perseverance, courage--all of the traits!
I met with the entire character education committee later in the fall to listen to their ideas and goals for our district, as well as their hopes for this project. I was encouraged to continue researching to find easy-to-use, dynamic resources for our parents to use, and several teachers on the committee were anxious to use these resources in their classrooms as well. Being both teacher and parent, I am perhaps doubly motivated to learn about these resources and to use them myself! In fact, I was delighted to discover such things as Wingclips (a website with inspirational movie clips you can use in your classroom/home), Global Leadership (a British-based organization promoting global literacy and environmental responsibility among children), and Generation On (an American group that encourages and links kids and families with community service needs in their area, region, nation, and beyond). Our class studies of government documents and history pointed me to some wonderful resources that are in our very own backyard, including the local historical societies and museums (what better way to learn about such things as courage and perseverance than with our ancestors?).

I worked very hard to make the libguide a reflection of my excitement and commitment to the committee’s goals. I consulted my own children (ages 6, 9, 9, 12, and 14) to offer suggestions as to its layout, color scheme, and word choices. (I have the advantage of having a good cross-section of ages and tastes right here at home!) I wanted the guide to look simple and be easy to use, and I also wanted engaging visuals. I consulted our technology coordinator at school to help me in figuring out how to add an image and link it to a website within a dynamic text box. I used other boxes, as well, but I found myself using the dynamic text box most of all.

As I work to put the finishing touches on the libguide for this semester, I have been in frequent contact with various members of the character education committee, especially my mentor. The more the guide grows, the more the committee’s enthusiasm grows, and they are anxious to share the link to it with the general public (our parents). It will be linked to the school’s website and is entitled “Potosi, A Community of Character” because that is the name of the character education initiative here. Everyone around these parts knows that when you say “a community of
character”, you’re talking about these character traits, this iniative, and the great people (kids, parents, staff, and community members) of this small town.

Perhaps one of the most gratifying outgrowths of this project is the introduction of “I-Mom Mornings” to our school. I learned of “I-Mom Mornings” when I landed on the All-Pro Dad website, a division of “Family Minute” which is a faith-based character program equipping parents to build strong families. All-Pro Dad is obviously the program for fathers, and from there I found “I-Mom” which is an online resource for mothers. “I-Mom Mornings” are held once a month at your school, where mothers and children meet for breakfast, character-based discussions and activities (including a complete curriculum). When I shared this concept with our committee, another teacher-mom and I decided to jump on board, purchase the curriculum, use our school cafeteria’s new video projection system, and institute I-Mom Mornings beginning in 2013! We plan to rearrange the lesson plans to coincide with our monthly character traits. We still need to work out a few “kinks” with the district kitchen staff, but the ball is rolling! It is our hope that a few area fathers will become inspired to start All-Pro Dad breakfasts on a monthly basis, as well.

The character education committee has given me specific things to work on, and I feel very proud about the research I’ve found and compiled for this project. I am grateful for the research process, the skills I’ve learned, and the possibilities for more learning on this topic in the future.